

FERRYBOAT
across
the KIRENGA

STORIES

WINTER is COMING

OIL on FIRE

A HARD NIGHT on the
RAILROAD

FIRST TIME in MOSCOW

FERRYBOAT across
the KIRENGA



Progress Publishers Moscow

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1 Yuri Antropov

2 Valery Povolyaev

3 Boris Mashuk

4 Vladimir Mirnev

5 Vyacheslav
Shugaev

4



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Moscow

Translated from the Russian
Designed by *Grigori Dauman*

ТРУДНЫЕ КИЛОМЕТРЫ

Составитель Ю. Лопусов

На английском языке

© Издательство «Прогресс», 1980

English translation © Progress Publishers 1980

Printed in the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics

T $\frac{70500-032}{016(01)-80}$ 108—80

4702010200

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The life of the Soviet people is rich and many-sided. Wherever you look—north, south, east, or west—exciting work is in full swing. The historical schemes of the Communist Party receive their concrete embodiment. The new, the new, the new—that is the leitmotif of our life.

Writers consider it their duty to the people to recreate in their works the image of Soviet man—the builder of Communism—profundly, sincerely and truthfully. Writers of all generations, from the founders of Soviet literature to the youngest authors, participate in this noble and responsible work.

The continuity of generations, their joint creative activity, is a remarkable feature of Soviet literature. Nowadays the introduction of new and talented names is a regular and extremely important feature of every literary-artistic publication, of every publishing house.

I believe that Progress Publishers has shown useful initiative in offering the pages of its next publication to works of young Soviet writers. Yuri Antropov, Vladimir Mirnev, Boris Mashuk, Valery Povolyaev, and Vyacheslav Shugayev are just beginning their creative literary life; their experience as writers is still quite small, although several of them are already the authors of two or three books.

The works of the young writers published in this book are distinguished by fresh observations, sincerity, a search for expressiveness, and an active involvement with their heroes and with all aspects of our life. It is difficult

to predict the further creative development of each of them, but, judging by their approach, by their responsible attitude towards literary work, one senses that they have entered literature for a long time and are very well aware of its immense significance in the life of the people.

Characteristic of Soviet literature in recent years is a growing interest in the working man, in the image of the worker and the psychological problems which arise in the process of scientific and technical progress. New features of our life are complex, and it is impossible to understand them without having the closest ties to the life of the people, without each writer's active participation in the everyday life and struggle of the Soviet people.

The creative path of the young writers presented in this collection is characteristic of the present-day younger generation of Soviet writers. Their working lives also have much in common: before beginning to write, each of them travelled a great deal and tried out several professions. Boris Mashuk from Blagoveshchensk served in the army, was a sailor in the Far East, a turner, and a rigger; Yuri Antropov travelled hundreds of kilometers with geological expeditions, searching for oil; Vladimir Mirnev taught school for many years; Vyacheslav Shugayev operated a milling machine and was a correspondent for a number of Soviet newspapers; Valery Povolyaev studied both as an artist and as a film scenarist—his pictures have been displayed at international exhibitions, he is an enthusiastic mountain climber, and travels about the country a great deal.

It is gratifying that present-day reality served as the basic material for the works of these young writers. Their own experiences can be sensed on many pages of the stories published here. It has always been that way: each generation of writers brought into literature signs of their own times and present-day passions. It is precisely this which makes Soviet literature an artistic chronicle of the Soviet period. No doubt the new generation of writers will remain true to this fruitful tradition, and will deepen and develop it in their work.

There is no further reason for me to detain the reader's attention. I invite you to begin reading. I am convinced that this anthology will give the foreign reader a chance to understand the main artistic seekings among young Soviet writers, to form an idea of the level of their creative maturity, the breadth of their interests, and the nature of their aspirations.

Georgi Markov

YURI ANTROPOV, born in the Altai town of Leninogorsk in 1937, graduated in geology from Moscow University.

His years in the field as geological prospector awakened a thirst for knowing the life of the people around him. He was stoker, lader, club manager, marker and workers' hostel superintendent. His first story "An Emotional Job" won him the Nikolai Ostrovsky prize in 1968. The novels *White Soul*, *Winter is Coming* and *Ivanovsky Ridge* published in recent years, had a good reception.

Antropov's stories are about people, their work, their family and personal relations, and the quest of their spirit.

Yuri Antropov

WINTER
is COMING

T

hat spring Venka began seeing nightmares. They were vivid, and contained details that made them seem real.

This had never happened to him before; he would even sweat when thinking about it. Regaining his senses, Venka would sit up in bed for a while gazing into the dark.

In the morning, before getting ready for work, he would recall what he saw at night and burrow under the blanket, wondering why he was seeing the dream night after night. It was about the chlorinator in their shop exploding. During his shift. It wasn't a trifling explosion either, but the like of which had never been seen. The fire devoured everything before you could bat an eyelid, and his canvas overalls charred from the heat without even catching fire.

All had dissolved in smoke as if the shop had never existed. But he was alive. In these strange nightmares Venka always remained alive, like the trunk of the colourless grey poplar outside the tool shop, whose sickly leaves shrivelled each summer before their time, without even filling out.

Still, a dream is a dream, whereas his arm began causing real trouble, as in the days when breakdowns did happen and he overstrained it to set things right. That was the way it was going to be for the rest of his life: his arm had been crushed during the assembly of the chlorinators, soon after he had come back from military service. Now the mere mention of the damned monsters in conversation was enough to make his arm react. Even those silly dreams were enough to revive the old pain in his wrist.

"It's because you're getting dumber with age," Zinaida said, smothering a yawn. She was annoyed with Venka for waking her up in the small hours just to tell her his dream. "Didn't you say once you never had dreams?"

"What of it? Neither did you ever wake me in the middle of the night with your snoring," said Venka.

"What's that you said?" Zinaida, who had been about to go back to sleep, opened her eyes wide. "Me, snoring? My mother always said when I was little that I slept like a mouse. And have you ever heard of a snoring mouse?" With a forgiving smile, she put out her arm to embrace him.

"A mouse you say..." Venka drew away. "Some mouse!" For an instant he glanced at his wife with alienation. Her long legs and scraggy body reminded him of a heron. "What your mother meant was a cat, a mangy old cat purring loudly!"

"Why, you—If I didn't force myself..."

"Force yourself to do what?"

"To suffer your grinding your teeth at night. You can drive one out of one's mind with the noise you make, or just cut and run!"

"Run, run if that's what you want."

"Not me. I'll wait till you run. Don't think I don't know," Zinaida sniffed and turned her face to the wall. "Don't think I don't know why you go to the factory so early, two hours before the shift!"

"Well, why?" Venka even leaned on his elbow.

"Because you're back at your old game with this Raissa, you old skirt-chaser!"

"You're nuts, Kustitskaya..." Venka heaved a sigh.

"Sure, and you aren't. Not a bit. Goodness, as if I didn't

know!" Zinaida sobbed. "You're sick and tired of the emergency repairs you're doing but you won't give up, though you've grown yellow from gas and look like a corncob."

"What can't I give up—Raissa?"

One thing led to another, and ended in a real row.

"What could you expect from her?" Venka thought in the bus, amazed at how Zinaida had managed to twist things.

All the way to the factory he stood at the back of the bus, eyes fixed on the window. He wasn't in the mood to see anyone, any acquaintances who might have got into the bus.

And he turned gloomier still when he recalled his wife's last words. No escaping it, there was a grain of truth in what she had said.

Funny, but this truth had been sort of hidden from himself.

Once in the tool shop, the moment he closed the door, he immediately perched on the edge of an iron bench. In the empty room every sound echoed hollowly, and it was better to sit quietly, sensing with one's back the faint hum of the chlorinator behind the wall.

These were good moments. Especially, when all the machinery in the shop was humming and wheezing rhythmically, and there was no irregularity. You felt it with your skin: so far everything was running smoothly. No need to worry.

There was just the bare branch of the poplar, which kept jerking in the wind and rapping on the window, with something despondent in this rapping.

An hour to go before his shift began.

"Ha!.. You're just the man I want to see. Greetings, chum!" Torpedoboot, the night fitter, smiled at him broadly from the threshold. "I sure turned up in time..."

Torpedoboot's false teeth glittered in the lamplight. A silly habit, calling Venka a chum. What had put it into his head? They were mostly on different shifts, never drank together, not even on payday when you're glad to

team up with anybody and happy to offer a drink to the devil himself. Venka didn't even know Torpedoboat's name. It was rumoured he'd served in the navy once and always wore a sailor's singlet. That was why they called him Torpedoboat. That and because he was ridiculously tall and indescribably impudent.

Venka was about to answer back. What's the big idea? Look for a chum someplace else. But he remembered that he hadn't welded the broken off blades to the screw of the motorboat that this confirmed angler had begged him to do.

Venka felt guilty and did not know where to hide his eyes.

"Hi..." was all he said.

Squeezing Venka's hand in his, Torpedoboat tried to catch his eye as if he wanted to look into his soul.

"Whether you look or not, there's nothing I can say to gladden your heart," Venka thought.

"We've had a trying time, as you know..."

"Of course, I know!" Torpedoboat cackled. "There's been a foul-up but it's smoothed over."

"What a damned fool thing to do." Venka felt still more ill at ease. "He has the same job—adjuster and fitter. But the foul-up occurred during my shift; we were the ones to sweat and fume. That was how things 'smoothed over'."

"Now I purposely asked for the day shift." Torpedoboat's teeth glittered again. "Now while there is time we could weld the screw."

"Why don't you do it yourself? You've got the same pair of hands."

"Ha... Sure, I could do it. But that's just it—mine are ordinary hands, while yours, they say, are made of pure gold."

"You don't say..."

Venka got the heavy screw out of a drawer, its paint peeling off, and bent over the gun welder.

"How'd you manage to ruin the thing? You're supposed to know the river like the fingers of your hand."

Torpedoboat yawned:

"Raw deal..."

"What's that?"

"I said raw deal. You plan it one way and it works out another."

Venka gave the statement some consideration, and snorted. He lit a match, and held it to the jet of gas from the welder. That moment somebody's hand stretched for the screw from behind his shoulder. A white hand with clean nails, a hand that had never been stained with iron scale. And the cuff was blue, like that of a law officer.

He watched the hand take the screw and bear it away. Then Venka turned. It was a law officer, small, smart and well-built. Four stars on his shoulder-straps. Good man. No matter that he was still green. And how he had walked in—without making a sound.

"I was just beginning to wonder who it might be..." Venka muttered.

"Is this yours?"

"Why d'you ask?"

"I ask and you've got to answer."

Venka's eyes narrowed and his nostrils quivered.

"Don't get rough, Comrade Captain?" he said quietly, with ingratiating civility, and, rising to his feet, involuntarily began buttoning his overalls.

Now it was the captain who blinked, lost some of his self-assurance. At that moment Torpedoboat got into the fray.

"It's my screw," he grinned. "Comes from my motorboat. I've ruined it a bit..."

"Where did it happen?"

"Oh, sort of gradually, on all the shallows in turn..."

"Why were you so careless?"

Torpedoboat was taken aback.

"What do you mean, Comrade Captain? What sort of carelessness are you talking about? When you're chasing a poacher it doesn't occur to you to think of your boat, let alone of your life?"

"He's lying," Venka thought, not yet knowing what it was he disbelieved: Torpedoboat's chasing poachers, or this bravado that he spared neither himself nor his boat.

The captain turned the screw over in his hands, examining the blades and trying to catch the light with its dimly glimmering edges.

"What's this all about?" Venka asked. But the captain put down the screw and walked out of the tool shop.

"Try and find them now!" Torpedoboat said with a snicker, looking at the door. "Besides, who are we to look for? And why? If he'd say they'd killed someone. But the way it was—a slight collision and that was all. Someone knocked into Simagin's boat in the dark, and he raised hell. He says it was an attempt on his life."

"And who's Simagin?"

"The fishery inspector. He's on our staff. But you put the wind up the captain!" Torpedoboat sat on the bench and poked Venka in the side. "He has no idea who it was, and popped up at the factory... Must've been Simagin who got him to come. For him every man in a boat is a poacher. He doesn't care if it reflects on the good name of the working man..."

Venka lit another match, but did not lift it to the gun welder. Instead, he held it like a candle until it burned out. The flame touched his finger, cast a reflection in his eyes and died.

"You know, I also planned signing up as a volunteer fishery inspector," Venka said.

"You don't say!"

"I mean it. Me, you can trust. I wanted to last year."

Venka paid no attention to Torpedoboat's mocking reaction. He would not have taken it from anybody else, say from another fitter or the foreman. But this was a special case. Torpedoboat was no ordinary fitter, he was also a fishery inspector, even though non-staff.

"Perhaps you had also meant to join the year before last?" Now Torpedoboat was obviously making fun of him.

"Honestly. Last year at the time of the big campaign."

"What campaign?"

"Environmental protection. That started me thinking. Why not join up? Besides there wasn't much else to do on weekends."

"Why didn't you sign up then?"

"I have no boat."

"Oh, a boat..."

"Yeah. Where to buy it? Ours is a river town and the queue for boats is several years long. Don't you know how

it's done?" Venka got sore for no apparent reason. "Those who should be the last to get boats, or guns, or cars, always happen to get them first. While *you* sit and wait! We let all sorts of good-for-nothings get equipment, and then start howling: 'They're destroying Nature, killing off game and fish!...'"

Torpedoboat sniffed and looked long and hard at Venka. But Venka had pulled on the dark glasses and started the gun welder.

The episode was incessantly on Venka's mind whatever he was doing. Just to think: crashing into a boat at full speed—with a man in it.

All day, without being quite aware of it, he stealthily watched Torpedoboat.

"Keep your mind on your work!" he yelled when Torpedoboat almost dropped the steel plate he was helping Venka to adjust.

The fitters and the mechanic exchanged glances—they had never heard Venka shout before.

Later, Venka made a blunder himself: he did not manage at first try to clamp a plate and was so furious that he stormed at the mechanic:

"A gang like this only sucks you dry. That's no way to work. It's not a shop, it's a communicating yard—people coming and going, changing shifts all the time... How d'you expect us to pull together?"

Torpedoboat listened in servile silence. After the shift, however, he said as if nothing had happened:

"Let's get my screw done, chum. Stay behind for half an hour?"

Venka gazed at Torpedoboat and recalled his habit of scattering the tools and respirator all over the place after the shift. He would fling them in any direction and scuttle off to the locker room. Venka knew from his own experience that you couldn't be equally careful with what belonged to you and what was government property. Venka's tools at the factory were always neatly laid out on the shelves, each in its own cell. At home in the storeroom, where he once had everything handy, things were now in

utter confusion. Besides, most of the good things had been borrowed by neighbours, and never returned.

"Why don't I refuse him?" Venka asked himself, fighting the temptation to do just that. "It's because he's a volunteer fishery inspector. He can't possibly do without the boat." A minute later he asked himself in amazement: "But why am I making a poor job of it? Because my heart isn't in it: there is something fishy about the whole thing—he may be an inspector, but he couldn't have risked his boat because of poachers."

Venka deliberately overheated the metal, so that the screw would be sure to crumble, smashed to pieces on the first shallows it came to.

The days seemed to drag more slowly than usual.

The work was the same: they hustled round the red-hot kilns, which burned through now here, now there. Still there was something unusual. As if something was missing, though Venka didn't know what. It was that something wasn't clear enough.

To stop thinking about it, he grumbled to himself at Zinaida: "It's all her fault! Put me in the dumps. 'You're sick and tired of the factory,' she said, 'your shop and your work...' It's her I'm sick and tired of, that's clear."

He began thinking of the recent event connected with inspector Simagin. And made up his mind to see the fishery inspector after the shift. "I want to make your acquaintance!" he would say. The most natural thing to do—come up to the man and pour your heart out. That's if you feel a compelling need to do it. He won't chase you away, will he?

No, he wouldn't put it off. At lunchtime he went to see Sanya Ivlev and ask him to come along.

As luck would have it, Venka nearly ran into Raissa on the way. She didn't notice, walked along the edge of the road, heading for the chlorinator shop and putting her hair straight.

The moment he saw her, he at once forgot where he was going and why.

Hiding instinctively behind a shield—a board with the photographs of the best workers—Venka watched Raissa until she entered the shop. He kind of hoped she hadn't gone there to see him but would have been upset if he had seen that she really hadn't.

That was that. Clear as daylight. And not to him alone. All his mates had noticed by now that the girl from the tool shop had begun coming again—the one that Venka had had a secret affair with the year before, until Zinaida broke up their romance.

Leaving his hiding place, Venka examined his reflection in the glass, smoothed his hair, passed his calloused hand over his unshaven face, and ran after Raissa.

"The fool!" he whispered. "What does she want?"

Another voice in him said there was no reason why she should not come... After all, she wasn't making any demands. She would stop over and go upstairs to the gallery to talk for half an hour or so with the girls who were assembling a control panel, all the while glancing down at the door of the tool shop, and then go down to the canteen. She knew Venya was never among the first to attack the counter and that he would come after all the hungry ones have had their fill and it became quiet and cosy in the canteen. Raissa would sit down at a neighbouring table with a glass of stewed fruit, and would gaze unseeingly at the wall past him, sipping her drink with an expression which said that she had come to the far-away canteen for the sole purpose of having this uncooled mush.

At such moments Venka felt especially irritated. But it also made him happy. Turning angry eyes on his easily amused mates, whom he had to check in time and who had made a habit of coming to the canteen at such instances and sitting there as they would at a concert, he looked stealthily at Raissa and his heart missed a beat. He recalled the days he dated her, took her out to dance and sung love songs to her.

"Raissa, wait a sec!" He caught up with her in the hall leading to the locker room.

She instantly turned round as if frightened by the sound of his voice. She was actually frightened and her big brown eyes, which had driven him crazy a year ago, looked

as if they could not believe it was really him, Venya Komrakov.

"I thought you were on holiday..."

This meant she knew that they had an accident in the shop yesterday, during his shift. Not really much of an accident. It was only the fifth chlorinator, which had again shown its temper. The technologists simply didn't seem to be able to get the better of it. They sweated over their calculations, but to no avail. Venka often said sarcastically he would be glad to give them adjustable spanners and gas-masks instead of slide-rules—then they'd find the right way to adjust the chlorinator in double-quick time.

"'On holiday, on holiday!' All of you saying the same thing..." he smiled at Raissa.

"Who do you mean by 'all'?"

"Well, everybody. Want to get rid of me, do you?"

"But that's the rule," Raissa smiled at him uneasily. "After an emergency those who inhale too much gas are given a holiday."

"Well, Raya, you're some girl!" he laughed, now quite reassured. He had already looked around and made sure that his mates and the mechanic had gone to the canteen. Nobody could see the two of them now. "How come you know all our rules?" he asked.

"You once told me about it yourself."

"Me?"

"Who else?"

"There she goes again... Hinting at the past..." thought Venka, his spirits sinking.

Raissa seemed to have read his thoughts and smiled ironically with the corners of her lips.

"I pity you."

"Me?"

"Who else?"

"What's there to pity?" Venka's voice quivered.

"Though you're not really pitiful, just stupid."

"Stupid?" Venka arched his eye-brows.

"Sure," Raissa tormented him in a calm voice. "You are stupid. Because anyone who's got any brains would never go rushing into the fire."

"Hm," Venka screwed up his eyes. "Looks like she is

really worried about me . . . I never heard anything like it from my wife!"

"I do feel as if I'm dragged into it, Raya. I've always been attracted to hot things." He switched to a joking tone with an instant sense of relief, and the palm of his hand suddenly itched to touch her neck lightly and to tousle the hair at the back of her head, just as he had done it then, last spring.

She read the look in his face and stepped back a little.

"That's why you keep burning your fingers all your life," she said.

"Again referring to the past . . ." Venka suppressed a sigh. But he could no longer control himself.

"Look, Raya, what are you hinting at?" he said looking into her clouded eyes.

If she said something rash now, he would be very much relieved: Venka always hardened for a long time when he was affronted.

But the girl's intuition must have told her that this was the time to keep quiet. She lowered her head and began rolling a deformed nut with the tip of her shoe and then, as if remembering the way she used to touch his heart-strings, she looked him straight in the face, her eyes instantly changed, all trace of sadness vanishing from them.

"What's wrong, Venya? Scared again?" she asked him almost merrily.

"You're a queer sort," Venya smiled convulsively. "What does it have to do with fear? Though of course you know all about my Zinaida. I feel sorry for her. And not just that . . ." This time his eyes were clouded. "After all I married her for love. This you've got to understand. And it's been seven years. You can't just cast that overboard."

"Why did you kiss me then?"

"When did I?" Venka's eyes grew round.

"Don't you remember? You're certainly quick to forget. Have you forgotten how your dear wife turned you out of the house?"

"And what would you have done in her place? This is the way you women are—pity no one but yourself. Sure, she made us part. That's her right as a wife. She's my lawfully wedded wife after all . . ."

"And me? I was just for sport..."

"Why d'you put it like that?" Venka frowned. "And then, Raya, there was really nothing between us! I didn't take any liberties, did I? What if I did kiss you lightly on the cheek?"

"Didn't you call me snow-fairy?"

"Snow-fairy you say? Goodness! It's just out of a song. Besides, I'm not saying I wasn't attracted to you. I still am. If I wasn't, I wouldn't stand here talking in front of the whole shop."

Raissa lowered her head again. She stood there biting her lip.

"So you say you can be trusted?"

"What do you mean?" Venka felt confused.

"Just that..." She sighed, and went upstairs to her girlfriends.

At that instant the mechanic appeared. As if frozen to the spot, he followed Raissa with his eyes.

"Isn't she cute... By the by, we've bought your dinner for you, Venya. I bet it's cold. You were so long..."

"What's made you so uncommonly thoughtful?"

"I don't get you, Venya."

"Neither do I." Venka backed off, afraid to give him an opportunity, as was his habit, for taking hold of a button on his overalls.

Again there was this unpleasant prickling sensation...

Trying to convince himself that the anxiety that had recently begun to build up in him would soon evaporate, Venka decided to play a game of dominoes with himself. In the morning he had put the pieces into the pockets of his overalls, because the day before they had not had time to finish a game before the shift. Clasping the pieces in his hands, Venka trusted to chance: if the domino in his right hand should have a bigger value than the one in his left everything would turn out well...

Without waiting, he unclasped his left hand and discovered a double four while the piece in his right hand only had one pip.

"An ace," Venka smiled scornfully. "I get nothing but aces all my life."

He no longer felt like going to see Sanya Ivlev in the thermo-evaporating shop, nor to the canteen. Food was the last thing he wanted in his state.

Venka marked time and finally trudged along the roofed gallery.

The bit of news he learned on reaching the retorts, blue-grey after the recent heating, struck him dumb. Ivlev, a shift operator, had got himself transferred to the chlorinator shop.

"You don't expect me to believe that, do you?" Venka asked the lad who told him the story. "I'm from the chlorinator shop myself."

The lad shrugged his shoulders: why on earth would he want to invent the story?

"I've seen Sanya here just a couple of days ago. With my own eyes. And he didn't say a word about any transfer. You must have confused him with someone else. He's dark-haired, stocky..."

"I know Sanya myself."

"How come I haven't seen him in the chlorinator shop?"

"If I got it right, he is upstairs, on the gallery. They're adjusting something up there."

So that's how it was. Venka at once remembered the central management and control board. Sure he knew what it was. Besides, it was the gallery that Raissa frequented. But while she would go upstairs for want of something better to do, just to chat with the girls, Sanya Ivlev was there on business.

Venka almost ran to his shop. He literally flew up to the gallery, his heavy boots thumping on the iron stairs. He had hardly caught a glimpse of the maze of wires which in blue wreaths covered the brightly coloured blocks of lamps, when Ivlev, hardly recognizable in his new blue smock, noticed Venka's dishevelled arrival.

"What's the matter with you? Anything wrong?"

Wrong? He dares ask.

Catching his breath Venka smiled ironically:

"Everything's fine. No pits and snags in my life. It's on your account that I've come. People keep telling me things and I don't believe them."

"What's that?"

"That you've got a bee in your bonnet. Are you trying to impress somebody?"

"What do you mean?"

"Hm, what I mean... You left the tool shop for the welding shop. That's all right. They made you team-leader. That's all right too. It was nice there and quiet and there was plenty of fresh air. But hardly six months have passed and you get it into your head you want to fiddle with retorts."

"If you want to be exact, before taking to retorts I was in the refining shop," Ivlev put in.

"That was another of your whims," said Venka spitefully. "You got the hang of things there, and next you got yourself transferred to our chlorinator shop. With your weak lungs... You fathead, it's as if you didn't know we have so much gas around you can't see farther than your nose. Are you in your right mind?"

Ivlev knew his friend well and guessed at once what had enraged him so. He felt injured. For he was always pretending that his was an exceptional job that few could do—a job to which he was sacrificing his health and may even give his life. And now, just think of it, a nobody had come into a job in his shop.

"Don't be ridiculous, Venka. My lungs've got nothing to do with it. That was ages ago. No sense in bringing it up now. Besides, I'm not trying to get into the emergency team." Now, Ivlev was trying to spare his friend. "I'm with the assembly men. If you come to think of it, I'm not really in the chlorinator shop."

Venka knitted his fair eyebrows.

"Well, that's as you say. You're a sort of assistant worker. Nobody will ever be able to tell if what you do is any good. And you'd better get used to the idea, since you've taken up studying." Venka gave a condescending laugh. "You'll get that diploma of yours and for the rest of your life you'll drudge over papers, trying to invent things. In the meantime I and the likes of me," Venka slapped himself on the chest, "will test your brainstorms in practice and put them right. It may well happen," Venka winked, "that after we've put them right and taken them apart you won't so much as know them."

"I take your word for that," Ivlev said with a smile. "Our workers are mighty intelligent chaps and can get along perfectly without engineers and all this scientific crap..."

"Never doubt it. Just tell me, who makes titanium—you or me?"

"D'you want me to speak of things the way they are now or how they'll be when I'm through with my studies?"

"Whichever way you like."

"Well, when I finally get my diploma and become, say, a superintendent in the chlorinator shop..."

"How d'you like that?" Venka stuck his fist under his friend's nose. "Some doer you are! We've had bosses here, and sometimes had none at all. But the titanium kept on running along the tubes all the same. Because it's me who does all the work in the heat by the kilns and the chlorinators, not the boss."

Turning away from Venka's fist, Ivlev frowned. They should not have started this useless battle of words. Ten years had gone by since Venka used to say: "We're going to make metal with wings to it!" They were young then and it all seemed so easy.

After Venka returned from his army service he was the first to decide that he would take part in building the titanium-magnesium combine. It was he who had tempted Ivlev, his neighbour in the barracks, to do the same. They came here as young Komsomols and were given a pair of stretchers—to carry heavy loads. They began from scratch, starting with the foundation. The idea was that the shop should be their second home. Nor was their story so unusual.

Later they worked in the tool shop, in a team of fitters. Venka had third grading since before the army and was glad to teach Ivlev, his former sergeant, to tell the difference between wrenches and how to fit them on nuts. It all turned against him because his capable friend soon mastered the trade and in a matter of two years passed the exam for sixth grading outstripping Venka.

But that was only the beginning. Soon, without any fuss, Ivlev entered college. Not wishing to be left behind, Venka transferred from the tool shop to the emergency

team of the chlorinator shop. Not many are equal to the job, he figured, and certainly he wouldn't sit nights over any books—that was for cranks...

Then, Ivlev set out to learn all the production cycles. "Stop it." Venka pleaded. "You're in college—they'll make an engineer out of you anyway."

"I'll make an engineer out of myself. It's not the diploma I want, but knowledge."

This was when Zinaida made it a habit of comparing Venka to Ivlev: he was improving himself, he never deceived his wife, he this, he that...

"All right, I've got to go. The boys are waiting for me. And in any case, we're wasting time talking," Ivlev muttered.

"Go," Venka shrugged his shoulders with the same unpleasant prickling sensation inside. Zinaida's words resounded in his ears.

He looked Ivlev straight in the face and, trying to deceive himself, began thinking he felt pity for his chum, which was to explain the unpleasant sensation in the pit of his stomach. How could one help feeling sorry for a chap who had lost his head on account of his studies—milling about the combine, transferring from one shop to another, and all that.

Venka laughed and gave Ivlev a slap on the shoulder.

"What's got into you?" Sanya sounded bewildered.

"It's nothing... Come along."

"Where to?"

"To the moorage. The fishery inspection that is."

"Haven't you got anything better to do?"

"Not that I can think of."

"Really?"

"Really and truly."

"Lucky man."

"Sure. I've got luck enough to choke a man. That's true."

Venka was often tempted to pump Zinaida and find out why she thought he was sick and tired of the chlorinator shop.

Where did she get the idea? He was more than happy with the job on the emergency team. They could not possibly get along without him in the shop. No automatic device was clever enough to adjust a steel patch to the burned side of the kiln. That only intelligent human hands could do.

No need to dwell on it. Ivlev and his diploma. Even if he had two of them, his coloured wires and lamps would be of no help. Someone would still have to climb into the inferno—the white-hot fog—and grope forward with his wrenches and tools.

There weren't many fitters at the combine suited for the job. That's the heart of the matter—he had an unusual job. Few could measure up to it. So why let it prey on his mind. Did he like it in the chlorinator shop? That was his own business. But to be honest, he did not know it himself. And even if he didn't like it, he'd keep it inside him. He couldn't let himself weaken. He'd start running then. But where? And what for? As if it'd be different in some other place. How right the Russian saying: "A silly head keeps the legs on the run."

Once, after his shift, Venka stepped by Zinaida's shop near the combine and said from the threshold:

"Don't you pin-prick me any more. I beg you in all honesty."

Her hand swung away from the counters of the abacus.

"What are you talking about?"

"The same old thing. Work your abacus, I say, one counter here another there." He moved a few counters himself. "Keep your accounts and don't meddle in things beyond your ken. Get me?"

"You don't say."

She looked at him with wide open eyes. That's the way he always was. It knocked the breath out of one.

Good thing there were no people in the shop. A week left till payday, people hadn't money enough left to spend. And her sales figure, with it being the end of the month, still below target. Her head was going round as it was. And here, devil take him, came her man—as if there wasn't any other time to discuss family matters,

"Have you had your dinner?"

"What do you care about that? Don't try fooling me with smooth talk."

"That means you're hungry," Zinaida smiled with understanding. "I was just wondering..."

"Give me three rubles."

"What for?"

Things were going from bad to worse. Asking for three rubles before payday.

"I earn my money, don't I?" Venka burst out. A bad sign: he screamed only when he knew he was in the wrong.

What was it this time?

"He must have met Raissa again," she thought to herself. "Avoids my eyes. Goodness, when will it all end?"

Zinaida had heard from the girls at the plant that Raissa had again begun to frequent the chlorinator shop. Nobody had so far seen the two of them together, they had had their lesson, and were now more cautious. She had been foolish to pity Raissa when she caught her and Venka in her own apartment. She should have pulled her hair out, so she'd remember for the rest of her life what it was to tempt other women's husbands.

Zinaida sighed:

"Certainly, you earn your money. Did I ever say you didn't? You're a front-ranker." She couldn't stop thinking of Raissa. "You're tired, so tired in fact that you're philandering again."

Venka started breathing heavily and his pupils narrowed.

"Look here, Kustitskaya..." he hissed, his cheek-bones twitching.

Here he goes again, Zinaida thought, addressing me as Kustitskaya.

She felt her cheeks flushing with rage. She was angry—angry at Venka, at herself and at that third party, that man Kustitsky, who should have long been forgotten.

Years have passed, but Venka couldn't forgive her still. Venka had his last few days in the army and she had been sick of the uncertainty, of his jealousy and the frequent quarrels. That's when she yielded to Genka Kustitsky, a neighbour and a schoolmate. The two of them went off to another town. Venka tracked her down before they had

time to marry, pushed her into a car almost by force, and drove her to the airfield. He had just come back from military service and had more energy than was good for him. Without asking her, he decided to take her off to the Altai. He gave his word of honour he would forget their squabbles and forgive her elopement with Kustitsky. He promised he would never say a word about it. What was she to do? If she hadn't loved Venka, it would have been different...

"Take some of this money," Zinaida checked herself, and opened the drawer of the cash-desk. "And get out. Don't get in my hair." She turned back to the abacus.

Without looking at the money on the counter, Venka gave a crooked smile.

"See how fast she surrendered... So what if there's Raissa," he continued to attack his wife in his thoughts. "So what? You could and I can't? Were they making you marry Kustitsky? If you had loved me, you wouldn't have done what you did. What sort of love was it if she followed someone else after a bit of a quarrel?"

"You can choke on your three-ruble note," he muttered, fighting the temptation to bang his fist on the abacus and see the counters flying in all directions.

When Venka was already by the door, holding the door-knob, Zinaida stopped him:

"Wait a minute. I completely forgot... Just slipped out of my memory," she said as she placed a canvas-covered parcel on the counter. "This is from Maria. I got it at the post office on my way to work and decided not to go back with it. What could it be? Open it." She smiled in anticipation, as if his ugly words were completely forgotten.

Venka hesitated. He should have left at once. But parcels didn't come to them every day. Wonder what my sister Maria has thought of this time.

Without looking at Zinaida he cut the canvas open. There was dried fruit and a cap wrapped in paper. A strange-looking hat with a broad top.

"Hm..." Venka turned it over in his hands. "Seen anything like it?"

Zinaida picked up a few prunes and began chewing.

"Try it on."

Venka approached a round mirror on the counter. He put on the cap, took a step back. It was a clumsy cap and by Zinaida's look she was of the same opinion. In fact, she was ready to laugh.

"Like an airfield," she said with a hidden smile as 'she spat out a stone.

"It's you who's like an airfield."

Not that he was all that pleased with the cap or offended at his wife's making fun of it. The cap was unusual, to say the least, it was easier throwing it away than getting used to it. Still, it was a present from his sister, who had wanted to please him. His own, elder sister. That made all the difference.

A folded letter fell out of the cap that moment. Not even a letter, just a note with a few scribbled words. Venka scanned it with his eyes and read out loud: "This will shield you from the tetrachloride, which, as you wrote to me, burns your eyebrows clean off. Pull it on lower, down to your eyes. And if they're burned already, they'll grow fast under the cap."

Venka coughed, embarrassed by his sister's thoughtfulness and carefully hid the note in his pocket.

"Did you hear that? It's a good cap after all. And anyway what do you know about headgear? Your Kustitsky must have worn a hat. Sure, he's a wine-producer and a taster, fancies himself an intellectual..."

There was now not a trace of a smile on Zinaida's face. He liked it better this way. She couldn't even understand a present was a present.

He fitted the cap on his head and stuffed dried apricots into his coat pocket. Then, as if in passing, he flinked the crumpled three-ruble note off the counter and into the same pocket.

Thereupon he walked to the door. Without another word to his wife. But she had another surprise for him, catching him unawares again.

"Sanya Ivlev got his diploma," she said as Venka was walking out. If she had at least said it distinctly, not muttered it under her nose.

He turned round instantly and stood glued to the ground. Actually nothing had happened, he had long been prepared

for it. Still, his heart missed a beat. Something weighed on his spirits. It was as if a lottery ticket that you had thrown away had turned out to be a winner.

What was Zinaida to do in a situation like that? She was no fool and understood he was losing an old friend—what friendship could there now be between him and Ivlev. There had been ill feeling between them even before Sanya actually got his diploma and being aware of it Zinaida should have said, we are fine without any college degrees, we have lived without them for years and can do without them now.

But no, she preferred to look cool and to behave as if she was starved—rummaged in the parcel, looking for the nicest and choicest bits. Let her choke herself on the preserved fruit!

Zinaida reacted as if she had read his thoughts.

"Take some more money," she said. "Three rubles may not be enough." She pulled out the little drawers again.

See how she shuffled the cards! As if not a word had been said about Sanya's diploma. She was more than a wife, she was a perfect treasure.

Venka even felt embarrassed—such kindness in people usually baffled him. He put his hand into his pocket, fumbling for the three-ruble note.

"Thanks, it'll do . . . I'll go to the fishery inspection. I might make friends with someone, perhaps we'll have some beer together. I've been planning to go, but somehow never . . . They might even suggest who'll sell me a boat. Come along, will you?" he eagerly began to persuade her, feeling still more confused and trying to overcome this feeling. "Honestly, Zinaida, why won't you come? You can sit there on the grass looking at the river while I go to the inspection."

"You mean to say you'd take me along?"

"Why not?"

"I can't go, not today," she smiled, also looking confused. "My mate has gone to the storehouse and I can't leave. By the way, what about your arm? Does it hurt?"

"My arm?" He forgot all about it though it had bothered him awfully since morning or, rather, since the night before. "It's all right. Well then, I'll be going."

Venka saw Zinaida was bursting to know where he was going to get the money for the boat. It would have been a natural thing to ask. Venka recognised his wife's right to ask such a question, but now that he had softened he hated to talk about money matters. And anyway, what's the use talking about it. Empty talk does not add to your money. It only spoils your mood. They will manage somehow—borrow, and pay back gradually. Zinaida knew that perfectly well, so why wag her tongue?

He really respected her for that. Clearly, she did think about the money. One couldn't help thinking about it. But when they happened to have some, she spent it with an easy conscience. There was always something to spend it on. But when they had none, she managed without. In this sense, Zinaida was the right kind of person for a life without much money.

She kept quiet now, too, though bying a motorboat was not the same as spending three rubles on beer.

Venka wanted to stroke her shoulder, but a customer walked into the store, a dolled-up laboratory assistant from the chemical shop. "Zinaida, you've promised me a pair of tights," she said.

Venka cursed under his breath: "Canvas trousers would look much better on you!" Catching Zinaida's farewell glance, he went out.

Out in the street he shook his head. He had been in high spirits, and here is how it all ended. Couldn't a person express his feelings? And after that Zinaida reproached him for being unaffectionate. Other husbands, she said, kiss their wives in front of other people. You never do... How are you expected to express your feelings if life is like that? Today, for instance, he had gone to see her in the store, because he had something on his mind. But what?

It does not have a familiar name—just an uneasy feeling gnawing at his insides, at brain and heart, inexplicable and disagreeable.

A man lived as he could, never racking his brain, never wondering if he was really happy. Things cannot always run smoothly. Life is not like that. He always did his best to row as close to the streamline as he could. He never did

anything without putting his whole heart into it. He thought that on the whole things were as they should be. Now he saw he was just deceiving himself.

Of course, this had nothing to do with Zinaida. She had blurted it out without thinking. And had hit the mark by chance. By now she had most likely forgotten their unfortunate conversation, while he was left to suffer.

Venka stood on the store's porch for a while, looking around with unseeing eyes. He tried to collect his wits and figure what had brought him here and what he was supposed to do next.

At the nearby corner he saw a chap selling flowers beside a pile of packing-cases. He was in the same kind of cap Venka was wearing, and, forgetting about his open suitcase with the narcissi, he fixed his eyes on Venka.

"Hi, buddy..."

"Who, me?"

"Who else? Listen... How are things?"

"Fine, thanks," Venka shrugged and came up to the man.

"Absolutely fine?"

"Well... As they say at home in the Altai country 'Absolutely fine isn't fine enough'."

Venka bent over the suitcase and picked out a couple of flowers with smooth white petals. They had a lustreless sugary tinge in the light.

"How much?"

"Three rubles."

"What?"

"Three rubles, laddie, three!"

Venka smelled the flowers hesitantly, his nose touching the yellow pistil with the orange edge. The wet stems felt pleasantly cool against his palm, and Venka suddenly realised that he had never in his life given Zinaida flowers.

He would some day. When the lilac bushes blossomed—their own, not brought from some place else. He would break off a bunchful for Zinaida. But throwing away his last three rubles on a couple of flowers... Bringing her some flowers and immediately asking for more money... He might need it. What if he quickly comes to terms with inspector Simagin—such things happen, even if not too often—and they'll drink a glass or two of beer for

friendship in the refreshment room at the moorings. With a cough, Venka put the narcissi back into the suitcase.

The world around was amazingly quiet. He was not accustomed to quiet. It stopped up the ears. But after he glanced at the pink reflection in the dark evening river and saw the dawn spilled in the water under a stretch of purple willow he sat on his haunches forgetting what he had come for.

Venka stayed on the bank of the Irtysh for a long time gazing at the flowing waters and marvelling at the beauty and infinite power of Nature. The river flowed on and on. It had flowed so centuries ago. Before their town ever existed. And it would flow in the very same way even if the town with all its factories, ceased to exist. There was no end and no limit to its life. Though man interfered with it, Nature always had its own way—the river would still flow, if not here then someplace else, and the forest would grow along its banks putting out new roots, and the dawn would spread wide across the blue-grey sky.

He heaved a sigh and suddenly felt there was someone behind him. He turned round and saw Torpedoboat standing, a broad smile on his face.

At first Venka could not believe it—Torpedoboat was grinning like a cat! This was beyond Venka's understanding... He spat in the man's face and the man says it was God's dew. It was yesterday he had taken him to task in front of all the fitters. Spoiled another kiln, the fool. Someone else would have turned away after the chiding. People are proud and wilful. Mustn't rub them the wrong way, even if they deserve it. But this one didn't seem to care.

"What is it, mate?" Torpedoboat asked in a sweet voice. "Decided to come over finally? Your curiosity got the better of you?"

He shook his head with something like sympathy. It looked as if he had been expecting Venka and wasn't surprised to see him. There were gasoline containers in his hands. They were heavy and had damp stains near the cap. The veins on Torpedoboat's big hands had swollen. The air reeked of gasoline.

"Come on, mate, speak up."

Venka took a look at the wooden house with the blue window-frames that stood on edge of the cliff, near the water. By its looks it didn't seem to be fit for the fishery inspection.

"But I just..."

"Ha, I know—you want to see Simagin. D'you think I'm blind? Tolya!" Torpedoboat shouted in the direction of the yard.

A dog barked, clanging its chain. It was a big dog, and it came bounding from behind the shed. Venka involuntarily shrank back from the gate.

"What's wrong?" Torpedoboat placed the containers in front of him, blocking the way. "Come on, mate, don't panic. I'll do you a favour and introduce you to Tolya Simagin. You've lost weight in these few days. I'm the same way—if I get something into my head, I've got to have it." Torpedoboat feigned a care-free laugh.

At this moment Tolya Simagin appeared from behind the shed—a skinny man wearing a faded check shirt, buttoned to the top, which made his neck look even longer. How in the world could a long neck like that carry his head, which was disproportionately big. He was holding a funnel—must have been pouring gasoline into containers.

"A lot of noise and no fight," he began jokingly, though his voice sounded strict and his eyes scanned Venka, as if trying to figure out if he was a poacher, whom a volunteer inspector had relieved of his gear and motor.

"Come closer." Torpedoboat beckoned Simagin. "Let us have a better look at you."

"Why should anyone want to look at me?"

"Wrong, you've become a celebrity. Especially at our factory."

"What do you mean 'especially at our factory?'" Simagin looked somewhat differently at Venka.

"What's so surprising? Where did the militia go into action? Right in our shops. Who did they give the third degree to? The ordinary workers, such as this one," Torpedoboat nodded Venka. "Naturally, people want to see you and get to know the man who started the trouble."

Venka frowned.

"Where were you taking these containers? To the boat? Then move on while it's still light."

Torpedoboat grinned peaceably and shook his head.

"I'll have time for that, don't worry. It's a treat to be with you. You're a curious sort."

"Is it true about the militia?" Simagin asked Venka.

"Never fear!" Venka pulled a face and waved his hand. "Don't listen to him. The militia did come over—a captain who wanted to know all about screws. No action."

"So they did go after all..." Simagin grunted disapprovingly. "Didn't I tell the captain not to raise any fuss?"

He looked at Venka with something like guilt, as if apologizing for the captain's rash step, and asking what he, a stranger, thought should have been done in the circumstances. Something had to be done, of course, to give the poachers a warning.

Venka was glad Simagin talked to him frankly, holding nothing back.

"So what?" he said getting excited and inspired by Simagin's trust. "I would've done the same if I were the captain. That's the only way to act. We think we've become our own masters and can do as we please. Imagine that, crashing into a boat with a man in it!"

At first Simagin seemed to listen to him with interest, leaning his head to one side. Now he suddenly flared up:

"Stop dramatizing the boat thing! Perhaps nobody meant to crash into me. It may have been an accident..."

Venka guessed that he was afraid to believe the truth. He was afraid to think that someone had done it on purpose. To believe meant accepting the challenge. Either leave the river for good or stay and fight.

Apparently Torpedoboat, too, understood Simagin's state of mind. His bulging, fish-like eyes flashed.

"This chap here," he nodded at Venka, "suspects me. Thinks it was I who crashed into you. Did a beautiful job on the blades for my motor. Some job: he's got hands of pure gold. The screw was no good before I even grazed against the pebbles."

His words took Venka's breath away. This had never happened to him before—being accused of trickery in public.

"They were ruined, you say?" he asked in a husky voice.

"Nothing left of them."

"I put in a titanium cross-piece," admitted Venka, seeing that Simagin, too, was smiling.

"A titanium cross-piece?"

"Yes. They hold in the toughest rapids. Even if the screw has no blades."

Dumbfounded, Torpedoboat fell silent, trying to recall how it had all happened.

"When did you do it? Wasn't I there all the time?"

"It doesn't take long. I did it while you were chatting with the mechanic."

"That's something, mate."

"Didn't you say it yourself." Venka looked at Torpedoboat insolently.

"Say what?"

"That you plan things one way and they work out another."

Torpedoboat gasped. Simagin, comprehending Venka's move and noting the stern, hostile look Venka gave Torpedoboat, grew serious himself. He said:

"He couldn't have done a thing like that." Meaning Venka should not lay such a trap. "Secretly placing a net to catch sturgeon, this he could do."

"Before saying that you must catch me red-handed at least once," Torpedoboat objected, sounding offended.

"Even if I haven't so far, I will."

"That's interesting..." Torpedoboat fixed his eyes on Simagin, as if trying to guess what it was that had lent Simagin his defiantly clear conviction. "He wants to catch me, ha-ha. Why not now?" Torpedoboat displayed exaggerated unconcern.

"Can't you chuck him out of the inspection without catching him red-handed?" asked Venka.

"That I can't," Simagin shook his head, while Torpedoboat put in with a grin:

"I was sent here by the factory people, get it?"

"What of it! You're going to poach valuable fish, and we can't even take away your inspector's papers? If I had it my way..."

"Have you got a motorboat?" Simagin interrupted Venka.

"Unfortunately not," he shrugged his shoulders guiltily.

"Do you want one?"

"No place to get it."

"Don't worry, I'll give you an address. One old man is selling his. It's a good boat, almost new. Has the most powerful motor, too."

Venka looked at Torpedoboot. He seemed downcast. Wasn't he pleased with this turn of events? Was this not the way he wanted it?

"There was once a dog that chased its own tail..." Torpedoboot muttered under his breath, as he took the gasoline containers to the boat.

It turned out to be a difficult day. Early in the morning the kiln on the third chlorinator had burned through and the entire shift headed by the mechanic was busy on the upper platform.

Until recently Venka used to like that sort of work. He enjoyed the atmosphere. Not a real emergency yet, no danger to life, but few were willing to approach the kiln. The heat was infernal, the skin on your face parched immediately. You looked like a scorched suckling-pig. What's more, you didn't get any special benefits, say a day off, for patching up the monster. And why after all? If the chlorinator were to explode, that was another matter. This, however, was routine. And since it was routine, it was your business to tinker in the scorching heat with no one having to say so much as a thank you.

Often, adjusters would—sort of by chance—hide behind each other's back. They would rather do the easier part, standing by, or doing an odd job. That was when Venka never waited for the mechanic's order, and went up to the kiln. He made for it almost eagerly, carrying asbestine mittens under his arm and rubbing his hands, which already felt hot, with what appeared to be contentment. He did not notice people exchanging glances that said he was probably not all there.

But this time Venka had thought better of it, and prodded one of those who shirked on the job more than others.

"Sick of playing the fool," he told Torpedoboot. "I'm

not going to put myself out for you guys. You plan it one way and it works out another, mate."

Torpedoboat gave a sickly smile, while Venka occupied the coolest place there was, near the oxygen cylinder.

He was delighted by his part of innocent onlooker. The bluish-brown kilns were throwing out tremendous heat and looked like some bizzare organ with several enormous pipes side by side stretching to the ceiling. It was a marvellous sight. But if you stood by, the organ gave you a hard time. The invisible, hot wave scathed the skin on your cheeks. The next minute your canvas overalls became stiff as a ramrod and it seemed it wasn't the arc-welder that sent up fire-flies, but yourself.

The momentary confusion had passed. Everybody went into action. Torpedoboat took hold of a steel patch and shuffled to the kiln shielding his face with his mitten. It was much too early to do that—the real job was still ahead. At first you broke into a sweat and then before you could bat an eyelid you were nice and dry again.

"Give me some air!" Torpedoboat yelled, taking off the respirator.

Collecting his wits, one of the mechanics aimed a hose of cold air at him. Still, Torpedoboat was stuck with the job, blindly attaching the patch while his face was turned to the air jet.

The mechanic who was in contact with the technologists checking the process in the kiln had already begun frowning and the hose of the respirator was making a rasping sound. He sent another fitter to help Torpedoboat, but that did not remedy matters for now they tried to hide behind one another. Time was running out. There was now more gas in the shop—tetrachloride coiled up through the hole in the kiln and the respirator did not help any more.

"Come on, Nikolai Sanych, send those dud workers to the devil," Venka told the mechanic.

With obvious relief the man began clanging the wrench on the piece of rail and the two wretches were only too glad to respond to the signal.

"Come, Venya, show them . . ." the mechanic said.

Venka had only just adjusted himself to the heat and, standing on his knees, taken hold of the edge of the patch,

when the flame of the arc-welder suddenly died. The air jet choked and then hissed hollowly.

"Hell's bills—have you fallen asleep there?" Venka squinted his eyes at the men.

Torpedoboat hurriedly lit a match. The yellowish flame with orange edges which normally took fire the moment you touched the valve and resembled a pointed lilac-coloured dagger, flared up sending forth a lot of smoke and then died away—there was no oxygen in the cylinder.

Crawling sideways, Venka pressed his face against the iron gallery floor, now getting used to the cool air of the shop.

"You bungler, Nikolai Sanych," he exclaimed taking off the respirator. "An empty cylinder at a moment like this!"

The mechanic said nothing. He let Venka's impertinent remark hang in the air, because everyone knew that going back into the heat was a hundred times more difficult, even though there was very little left to do.

"Venya, let's put on the collars."

"Good idea, of course, but you've got to have them before putting them on."

Venka hurried off to the tool shop. He bent a couple of bars to fit the kiln in diameter, made holes for the bolts on both ends, put on the respirator and rushed upstairs. When he arrived on the platform, it seemed to him that something had happened while he was away: it was much more crowded though there was gas around and you could not tell in the mist whether what you saw was a man or an empty cylinder.

There were, though, two men he definitely saw—they were the superintendent and the secretary of the Party bureau. These two dashed by. And while Venka was adjusting the collar to the kiln the emergency pump started working down below.

It started off with a low, droning sound. Dull and nerve-racking. It reached to the bottom of your soul. You felt like stopping up your ears.

But thin layers of gas were immediately drawn downwards. The white fog came to life and began to subside. The gas stopped stinging your eyes, and the chlorinator now stood out gloomily beside the pump wells, looking very mysterious.

"That's just what it is," Venka thought, his hands moving automatically, "the land of the wizard."

Once, about two years before, he had brought Zinaida to the shop. He wanted to show her what his job was like. He left her in the middle of the shop and went up to the kilns. She stood there for a while, jumping up and down as if she were on a frying pan and ran off, coughing. Couldn't stand it even for three minutes. After work she met him by the factory, which was unusual, and what was more she had tickets to the cinema.

It was a ridiculous film about the kingdom of some wizard. Venka had checked himself, not wanting to upset his wife. He could have grumbled at her for choosing a stupid film instead of, say, taking her husband to a restaurant. Venka dozed away the hour and a half, and the only thing he could remember was that there had been a great amount of fog in the film. Zinaida, however, enjoyed it and even laughed a little as she said: "They should've paid the wizard more for his health-hazardous work, as they do in your shop."

He feared she might begin calling him wizard. Fortunately, she lacked imagination.

Smiling to himself as he recalled all this, Venka adjusted the second collar. A hissing stream of tetrachloride hit his face and he pressed his chin against his chest to shield his eyes with the peak of his cap. Now he could not even tell whose hands were suddenly there to help him, taking hold of the collar at the opposite end of the kiln.

By the clank of the wrenches tightening the washers on the collar Venka guessed the fitter wasn't one of their team. He remembered this rhythm gradually gaining speed and then abating, the thread screeching at the point where the bolt couldn't be tightened any more, ever since the days he worked with Ivlev in the instrumental shop.

Venka was surprised as he got out from behind the kiln and faced a gas-mask which nobody in his shop ever wore, except in real emergencies. Next he saw Ivlev's eyes shining from behind the glasses.

"You oaf!" Venka shouted angrily. "Did anyone ask you here?"

However as soon as the collars fitted the kiln and Venka saw how hot Ivlev was under his mask, he pulled him im-

peratively by the sleeve, urging him to follow. When they were at the door of the tool shop, where the air was no longer a milky white, Venka jerked off Sanya's gas-mask.

Ivlev quietly examined his hands, which looked as if they never had a hair on them—glossy and wax-like. He did not even notice the tetrachloride in his hair.

"That's nothing," Venka smiled spitefully. "Your whole body should've been scorched so you don't poke your nose where you shouldn't next time."

"Should, shouldn't..." Ivlev made a face.

"Why did you come here? Busybody!" Venka pitched into him losing his temper.

"Come, stop it. From now I'm your shift mechanic instead of Nikolai Sanych."

"What's that? Are you in your right mind?"

"Why should that surprise you? It's too hard on the old man. He felt quite ill today. I was assigned yesterday. Now you better stop bickering."

Venka held his breath. Had he heard right? The hard notes in Ivlev's voice were something new. Even in the army Sanya blushed each time he had to pass orders to his squad.

Ivlev dried his face on the lining of his overalls. His wide black eyebrows, untouched by tetrachloride, protected his eyes from the top light.

"You'll regret taking our team. Didn't you see how hard things were here? If you couldn't find anything better you should've taken the central control board—wearing a nice robe, even a necktie. You and your diploma could've taken a better job, say head of a shift."

"What if I want to be superintendent", Ivlev smiled ironically. "Any objections?"

They might have started a real quarrel if the team hadn't come pouring into the tool shop. Nikolai Sanych came with the fitters and was smiling as if he was pleased with how he had handled things during the shift.

Dropping the argument with Ivlev, Venka began on his former boss:

"Here's the degraded one... How come, old man, you've suddenly begun falling apart? Messed up the whole job..."

Venka stopped short. Nikolai Sanych walked out into the

light streaming in from the window and Venka, open-mouthed, examined him from head to foot. Never before had he seen anyone come to the tool shop so dressed up. All of them wore rusty green canvas overalls, looking as though they were made of metal. Even the shop chiefs never dressed up, if they wore white shirts and ties, they had canvas jackets over them. That was the custom. But Nikolai Sanych—wearing a brand new suit and all the rest as if planning an outing.

"Brothers, I'm about to faint! . ." Venka staggered mockingly. "What does all this mean? And me thinking I should look for him in hospital . . ."

The fitters laughed with some reserve, and Venka didn't know where he stood. He had made fun of the man! Nobody had ever dared. Yet, they didn't rise to it.

"I'll bring you a nice-looking gal to marry, you old nut," Venka said uncontrollably. "You like them young, don't you?" Venka edged up to the mechanic: "You've always wanted to steal my gal, eh?"

Everyone knew about the silent war between Venka and the mechanic, and one of the fitters coughed and said:

"Nikolai Sanych's outstripped us all. He's received a . . . What d'you call it? A private office. Big enough to fit out two tool shops."

"Red carpets covering the place. I saw them with my own eyes." Torpedoboat joined in.

"You've got no business going to offices during working hours," Nikolai Sanych said with relief. He looked at the fitters with a smile, trying to turn it all into a joke.

They returned his smile. "When will we get a chance to see you then? After four, while we're still pottering about the locker room with our overalls, a whole line of people will gather there, by the office door."

Venka was beginning to understand:

"Wait a minute. What are you talking about? What office?"

"The trade union committee. Nikolai Sanych is now its chairman," said Ivlev. Venka gave a whistle of surprise.

"Wanted to work one last shift with you," said Nikolai Sanych guiltily. "Thought I'd say good-by after four, the way it's usually done. Even took along my necktie. But I suddenly felt faint. Thought I'd either fall on top of Kom-

rakov or knock over the kiln." He gave a cheerful laugh but Venka asked him in an anxious voice:

"Did you bring a barrel from home?"

"What barrel?"

"An ordinary wooden one. Women use them to salt 'cabbage. If the worst comes to the worst you can get one in the fifth shop—they've got barrels made of stainless steel with rough sides."

Nikolai Sanych looked at him askance.

"Why a barrel?"

"So we don't step on your feet when we kiss you good-bye." Venka was the first to laugh.

With his dark stained fingers Venka wiped the corners of his eyes, pretending he had laughed so hard tears had welled up. He turned to the fitters.

"I thought we were packing him off on pension. Well, I thought, now it's all tiptop. I'll have all the nice-looking gals to myself. With him here I never had any private life. But, alas, he's been transferred to the trade union committee. Which means," Venka shook his head in mocking grief, "that I'll have to share my girls with him again."

The fitters fell silent. All of them remembered how Nikolai Sanych pestered Venka, wanting to know why he came to the shop long before his shift. He followed Venka everywhere. Did it of his own accord. He caught him off his guard in different places and, as luck would have it, Venka was always with some woman. The mechanic would then bow his head, examine the girl from head to foot, and say: "Nice-looking gal..." He played on Venka's nerves. And though the mechanic justified himself by saying that it was not his idea—somebody had written to him, Venka's boss, that Komrakov did not get along with his wife and that the factory girls were to blame—still the whole team agreed the mechanic should not have believed an unsigned letter so readily.

"Venya, I always wanted to ask you, but never dared," Nikolai Sanych said in an oily voice. "You've got yourself a strange cap. Did your wife make you wear it? It covers your peepers, so they don't switch on when a woman comes into sight?"

Now most of the fitters laughed and Nikolai Sanych, feeling reassured, continued:

"Last summer I spent my vacation on the Black Sea. Half of the Caucasus was wearing these caps. I began thinking how Venka resembled them..."

"They have dark skin and black hair. Me—take a good look, open your eyes..."

"I've seen fair ones too. I met one in Sochi, selling soda-water." With feigned compassion Nikolai Sanych reached for Venka's overalls and with a reproachful look yielded to his old habit of tugging at his button, which was about to fall off anyway.

Here, Sanya Ivlev joined in the general laughter. Venka was quickly trying to decide how to come back at the new-fledged chairman.

"Nikolai Sanych, old man, what about your plans?"

"What plans, Venya?"

"Didn't you want to buy a boat?"

"Oh, the boat... Now, I don't need a boat. Give me time to look around. I'll get us a boat through the trade union committee, which we'll all use together. I'll have it one day, then you, Venya, then someone else."

"I don't want a public boat, not now, Nikolai Sanych. I'd have to wait for my turn all summer. I've already bought one." Venka felt the situation justified a lie. "The best," he added. "Runs smoothly, picks up speed like a hydrofoil and before you know, you're on an eagle's wings."

"Did you really buy a boat?"

"Why should I lie?"

"That's the end to all poachers," Torpedoboat said scoffingly.

Nikolai Sanych shifted his feet, then looked at Ivlev and mumbled:

"Well, I'll be going... What's there to write over to you? The desk or the telephone with a calendar? And these chaps of mine," he added, as if he meant all the fitters in his shift, though he was actually looking only at Venka. "They've already saddled you before the official act... So get down to business."

He tramped cheerfully out of the tool shop but halted

at the door. Feeling the knot on his tie with his fingers, he gave Venka another look:

"Say, what kind of motor does she have? I bet it's the cheapest and slowest?"

"Wrong," said Venka. "It's the best they have, Nikolai Sanych—powerful and neat. You won't get one like it even through the trade union committee. Twenty-five horse-power! And the price naturally..."

"My congratulations, Komrakov," the chairman returned to shake his hand. "From the bottom of my heart."

He slapped Venka on the shoulder and hurried out of the tool shop.

The others followed him out for the working day was over.

Ivlev pretended to have something to do and stayed. Fumbling about with the tools on the shelves he looked stealthily at Venka, waiting for his friend to say something that might kill the pain he felt after their tiff.

At this untimely moment Nikolai Sanych peeped in from behind the door.

"What are you loafing around for, Venya?" he lifted his bushy eye-brows. "Do you want to work another shift? There is a pretty young lady waiting at the gate for you..."

Venka gave him a blank look.

"What's all this about? What young lady?"

"How should I know? A nice-looking gal..." Nikolai Sanych shrugged his shoulders. But his eyes showed that he knew perfectly well who the woman was, and was upset it was her and not someone else. "Call my wizard," she had said, "he's the most agile fellow in the shop that smells of a bathhouse."

"Must be Zinaida," thought Venka as he exchanged glances with Ivlev and asked in a perplexed voice:

"Does it smell of a bathhouse here?"

"It does near the entrance, close to the locker rooms," Ivlev smiled.

"Then it smells of locker rooms."

Venka realised why Zinaida had come and chuckled to himself. He'll get the boat today. It was Friday, the end of the week. He and Simagin would take the hydrofoil to where the forester lived who was selling the boat.

The day before Venka had asked his wife to borrow some money—not less than three hundred and fifty rubles. He had already borrowed the same amount from his friends. The motorboat cost seven hundred.

When Simagin had told him the price, Venka looked at him unbelievably. He had thought the boat would cost two or three hundred, not more. Then he came to his senses: “Good God, if a bicycle, just two wheels on a frame, costs so much, what’s there to be surprised about?” He’d borrow the money—two hundred or seven didn’t make much difference. The main thing was to find someone who would lend him the sum. It was a good thing his mates helped him out.

Venka waited for Nikolai Sanych to close the door and took the gas-mask from Ivlev. He cleaved it with a knife and turned the rough hose inside out.

“Put it into your mouth, like this. As if it’s a baby’s dummy. Then you won’t feel sick. And put an ordinary clothespin on your nose,” he advised, “until you learn to breathe through your mouth that is, through the gasmask.”

Ivlev cackled, and was surprised at Venka’s thriftiness as his friend drew a plastic clothespin out of his pocket, clicked it in the air as if seeing how it worked and neatly fitted it on Ivlev’s nose.

“Wear it and learn to like it.”

Clean and dashing after a shower, Venka walked past the stern door-keeper holding his nose in the air, finding it beneath him to stick his finger-stained pass under her nose.

“Mother, you’ve got to recognise old workers with reputation and greet them by their surname,” he had told her once. He had been joking, of course, but she took it seriously. And though she always remembered him now she was never nice to him. She always wanted to see his pass, and looked as though she’d lay hold of him if he didn’t show it. He was green compared to her and she never forgave the joke. Venka snorted: “You give the green light only to those who wear hats. No proletarian stock in you, Mother!” But on the day Venka appeared at the factory in his strange cap, the kind nobody here had ever seen, she finally gave in. Fidgeting on her stool, she followed him with her eyes.

In the gate Venka saw Zinaida. She stood on the corner, reading a book.

"Good God, an intellectual wife . . ." jeered Venka. "What she deserves, the intellectual, is a good hiding."

Zinaida lifted her madeup eyes, pretending she had only just noticed him walking through the door from behind a maze of silver-coloured rods which to herself she called a pen.

"Why do you want to give me a hiding?"

"You have a long tongue. Why d'you call me a wizzard?" Venka hissed, looking sideways at the door-keeper.

Zinaida laughed and did not even deny the fact or say something to justify herself. Venka, flabbergasted, dashed out of the gate farther away from the door-keeper.

In the street Zinaida said:

"I've brought the money."

"How much?" Venka checked his temper at once.

"How much—how much . . . You think it's easy getting a lump sum?"

"If it were easy I would've got it without your help." It was clear she brought exactly the amount he had asked for, and he calmed down altogether.

"Why did you come to the gate? Didn't I tell you I'd drop in at the store?"

"I've arranged for someone to substitute for me." Zinaida shared the happy news with shining eyes and he guessed she was planning to go for the boat with him, and was ready to start immediately.

"That was clever of you," he nodded, looking for Sanya Ivlev with his eyes. "Now you can go home, get some sleep or write letters. Your mother hasn't written a long time. I wonder how our young ruffian is getting along . . ." Their five-year-old son lived with Zinaida's mother. Venka tried to imagine what his son looked like now, and heaved a sigh. "Once you're at it, write a couple of words to my folks too. We never have time to write letters . . . Now let me have the money," he held out his hand.

"I'm coming with you."

"Nothing doing. I don't need you there. You know I'm going on business, not for fun."

Zinaida made a wry face.

"Didn't you say: 'Zina, come with me to the mooring . . .'"

"When did I say it?"

"So you've forgotten..."

"Well, are you going to give me the money or not?"

"No."

"Splendid."

Then, Venka noticed Simagin. The inspector was walking towards him from the bus stop.

"You're lucky I see an acquaintance, I'd have given it to you."

"Venya, of all people!" Simagin spoke in a happy voice. "I had thought of leaving, and inquired about you," he said glancing at the door-keeper. "They told me there was no such person."

"I exist and will exist. They're the ones who don't," laughed Venka.

"We've heard a lot about you," Zinaida said. "My fisherman has been speaking of nothing else these few days."

Venka smiled absently. He did not suspect a trap and was trying to figure out why Simagin had come to the factory instead of meeting him at the mooring, where they had planned taking the hydrofoil to the old man selling the boat.

"He thinks you're not going to fine him any more," said Zinaida.

"What have fines to do with it?" Simagin asked.

"Don't you know? For catching prize fish, for using nets."

Venka felt the lobes of his ears turn crimson.

"What's this nonsense all about? What nets?"

"The usual kind, made of thread." She did not bat an eyelid. "I mean the ones you hide in the store-room. You've bought them this winter, don't you remember?"

Venka choked with rage while Simagin, perplexed, looked at him intently with an embarrassed smile on his face.

"You fool!" Venka snarled. "When are you going to stop your stupid jokes? Just fancy thinking up such a story!" His eyes begged Simagin to pay no attention to his wife. "Today's her day off," he explained. "That's why she's exercising her wit."

He stopped short when he saw Raissa at the entrance gate.

"This is one too many," thought Venka in a daze. Zinaida grew tense and was squinting her eyes, running her manicured fingers over the strap of her handbag. As ill luck

would have it, the bus was late and there were crowds of people at the bus stop.

Examining Raissa from head to foot Zinaida, to her dismay, could not find anything she might ridicule by saying for instance, look at this modern get-up—the fatter the legs, the shorter the skirt. Or something like that. She was good at it. But she could not make Raissa look silly.

Bursting with jealousy, Zinaida came up to Simagin, took him by the elbow and pressed her stiffened body to his. Simagin was terribly embarrassed, while she said, addressing Venka in a tense, faltering voice:

"Why don't you say hallo to your sweetheart? Go, embrace her. No one is stopping you. When you were my husband, you had to conceal your love. Now there is nothing to hide . . . Or is your love gone? So fast?"

Her flashing eyes vindictively looking first at the stupefied Venka and then at Raissa who went white.

When Venka regained his senses he pulled Zinaida away from Simagin, and breathed out in a fury:

"Just you wait, chatterbox . . . I'll give it to you!"

He did not know what to do and was ready to take to his heels. Fortunately, Ivlev appeared in the entrance gate and with him the chief of the fifth shop. Venka did not know the man too well, did not even greet him when he saw him, but now, remembering that the chief owned a car, rushed to him as if he were Venka's own father.

"Excuse me . . ." he said blocking the way and, to his dismay, unable to recall the man's name. "A distressing occurrence has just taken place. The ambulance took our friend to hospital. I know you've got a car here," Venka nodded at a line of private cars. "Could you give us a lift to the hospital? He may be dying for all I know . . ."

"What's happened and who with?" Ivlev asked in surprise, but Venka had by now darted to the cars.

"Which of them is yours? This one?"

"Yes, yes, get in."

They forced their way into the car. That moment Zinaida's manicured fingers clutched at the door handle. Venka knitted his brows.

"Just a minute, madam. This is an urgent affair. Get going, man!"

Zinaida was confused. The car was driven by an imposing looking stranger, wearing hat and necktie. She stepped aside involuntarily, while Venka leaned out of the window and pressed his thumb to his nose:

"Greetings to Raissa. Tell her I love you all!" He broke into a smile, glad everything had turned out so well.

The chief of the fifth shop was a quick-witted fellow and began laughing as he looked at Zinaida's reflection in the rearview mirror.

"This is what I call enterprise!"

He was obviously an easy-going chap. Still young, not much older than Venka. Venka liked such people. Too bad his shop wasn't up to much: it made casks for packing titanium sponge. "Pedallers," the fitters mockingly addressed those who worked in the fifth shop. Its chief they called Cooper. Venka had fortunately forgotten the nickname or he might have blurted it out when rushing to the man for help.

"Well now, where do we go?" asked Cooper.

"The nearest bus stop will be fine," Venka confessed.

"Sorry to have taken your time."

"It's nothing," Cooper, too, seemed to like his new companions.

"All we want is to get out of sight of the skirts."

"Skirts are our main worry," smiled Cooper. "But the trouble is... they took my driver's licence this morning. All I had was a little drink... It didn't even smell fresh, I had it last night."

"It's all the same to them," Simagin said with a cough. "If the litmus turns red, that's all the proof they want. They don't care when you had the drink—yesterday or today. They're getting very strict."

Cooper agreed, though he seemed to nod automatically: he was trying to think of a way out. They were driving past the outskirts of the factory district and when entering the village could easily bump into a traffic office. He had not been planning to go to town by car, had wanted to leave it in the shop—that was the safest. But he could not reject a rare opportunity. Fate had brought him together with pleasant companions...

He was most of all attracted by the fitter from the chlorinator shop. His name, if he recalled rightly, was Komra-

kov. A go-ahead chap he was. Besides, it was rumoured he was planning to buy a boat. Even if he wasn't, they said he was a fine boatman—repairing motors for all the laymen of the factory. Cooper badly needed a mate like him on the river.

Cooper also knew the fishery inspector. Once, at night he had lost the fairway (he had just bought the motorboat then and did not know how to handle it properly) and no one knows how it would have all ended if this smart fishery inspector hadn't come along just in time.

Cooper stopped the car on the edge of the road and dashed to the boot. Before his passengers could figure what this meant, he had brought out a board, inscribed in red, "Operational militia".

"Now we can go to the end of the world," Cooper winked at Venka.

Venka rubbed his hands in glee.

Ivlev turned to look at him accusingly from the front seat: that was the limit—taking up with Cooper, a fake militiaman who liked nothing better than pranks and booze.

Reading his thoughts, Cooper suggested:

"What if we club together, lads? A ruble each—that's a hundred and twenty-five grams each." A smile spread over his broad, slightly pock-marked face. Holding on to the wheel with one hand, his eyes never leaving the road, he stretched out his other hand—palm upwards—to the back seats.

Venka was at a loss: Look at that. Ready to carouse right in the middle of the road!

Avoiding Simagin's eyes, he put his hand into his pocket. Cooper said:

"I'm Boris or simply Bob."

This looked like he was introducing himself.

"Look here, Bob, we'll make you sob," Venka clapped Cooper's open hand.

He was happy not to have been mistaken in his impression of Cooper. Would a fine man like that go about collecting rubles? A ruble each, indeed. Obviously, this was meant metaphorically. In good company anyone would be glad to pay for all.

"Bob, turn to the grocery store, will you?"

Venka again fumbled for the tight wad of notes in his

pocket. It is not enough for a boat all the same. Zinaida has the remaining three hundred and fifty rubles. I would have to convince the man that I'll bring the rest later. Zinaida was to blame. If he had the full sum he wouldn't have taken a single ruble.

Simagin's head turned on its thin neck. He seemed to be freezing in his old grey raincoat with the upturned lapels.

"Listen here, Venya," he said. "You'll have to go without me. Don't lose time. Catch the five o'clock hydrofoil. I've written a note to the old man."

The inspector's lively grey eyes were full of obvious regret. They seemed to say: "Honest, I would have come gladly, but I can't."

Venka blinked. "Was that why you came to the factory? To let me know?"

"I'm going on a trip," Simagin confessed. "It's got to be tonight."

"What trip?" Cooper asked. "Ah! I got it." He seemed to say: you don't have to explain—we're bright enough to understand.

"Tolya, I could just as well go for the boat next weekend." Venka was upset. "It won't run away from us."

Simagin understood him and smiled.

"Venya . . . What will we do . . . go in one boat? It'll take hours before we whip up speed . . . How'll we catch them?"

"I would . . ." began Venka, but Ivlev said sarcastically:

"'Me, you can trust. I would, I would . . .' You think it's all so easy—get into the boat and the poachers run to you from all sides to give themselves up? You can't even swim . . . Remember, in the army we had to make a cross forcing of the river? You managed to fall off and began sinking at once."

His army friend couldn't have said anything more untimely. Still, Venka wasn't beaten.

He said to Ivlev: "Anyone can force a water barrier on a flying boat. That's nothing. But try show initiative . . . Suppose the enemy opens fire, the flying boat is ablaze. You might be riddled with bullets any time. What will you do? If you sit on your hands, as my comrade-in-arms Sanya Ivlev usually did, you won't get anywhere. You've got to use your noodle." Venka imitated diving with a gesture of

his hand. "More under water. You've got to be resourceful, like Fieldmarshal Suvorov—creep and crawl towards the enemy without being seen."

"You were dragged out barely alive," Ivlev could not let the matter drop. "The boys pulled you out by the scruff of your neck, and just in time. You'd still be creeping and crawling under water now."

Venka snorted and looked away. Simagin and Cooper laughed soundlessly and exchanged glances through the mirror.

"Just wait, Ivlev, I'll entice your fitter to join my shop," Cooper pretended to joke. "He's the kind of man I've been looking for. I'll create ideal conditions for him. This I guarantee."

"I'd never doubt that," Ivlev smiled ironically. "You can't get along on the Irtysh River without a good fitter. If the motor goes on the blink, it's the end. You'll sit in your boat like a dummy and wait till someone comes to help. And here you'll have a sort of orderly."

"That's what you think..."

Venka frowned:

"Stop it, Sanya. I've got a head, not a pumpkin."

When they reached the mooring, Simagin called Venka aside, put his hand on his shoulder, and said quietly:

"You can stay with Maximych, that's the forester, for a while. He's a fine old man. Go in the boat with him and wait till I come. I think I'll drop over the day after tomorrow in the morning. Then the two of us will look into every cove, every nook and cranny. The local men are completely out of hand. They fear neither God nor devil."

Ivlev jealously noted how amazingly alike the two were—lean, narrow-boned but strong. Of such men people say they are all bone and sinew.

Before parting, Venka and the inspector drank soda-water. This made the glum Cooper wink at Ivlev:

"See that? Well, well..."

At the last moment, when Venka was already at the window of the booking-office, the plant's trade-union car appeared. Nikolai Sanych sat upright in the front seat beside the driver, and Zinaida was looking out of the side window.

"Hi, militiamen!"

She waved to them with a smile and looked at Venka with sparkling eyes.

Venka was shocked. He gazed at his wife and did not know what to do. A pusher if there ever was one. Nikolai Sanych was no better—a good turn he did him.

Venka bought himself a ticket, ran up the ladder and, leaning over the sailor on duty whispered something, nodding in the direction of Zinaida and the car with the red board. The sailor, taken in, did not let Zinaida board the ship. He barred her passage: go and complain if you like. We're casting off.

"Smart lad," Venka said. "Well done."

That was the last straw. Zinaida burst into tears. Smearing mascara over her eye-lashes, she shouted after the departing hydrofoil:

"Don't worry, I'll turn up at the forester's anyhow!"

The sun was shining bright, making up for lost time, or so it seemed. It was ages since Venka last had a vacation. Sometimes, there were urgent things to be done in the shop and nobody seemed able to sub for him. Sometimes he didn't feel like going anywhere. Besides, getting out of bed and running to the plant as if he were given a filip was something that made him feel good.

The warm wind blowing from up the Irtysh carressed him. Relax, Venya, it seemed to say, open your soul to me and soften up.

The blue water with the white foam and the green river banks—yes, he would have loved staying here for the rest of his days, never to see the smoke-soiled city, its gloomy chimneys, and all the rest that imperceptibly hardened your heart.

In short, Venka found himself in an element that should have made his heart sing—at least during this short break, but, alas, it was not in the mood to sing. He was overtaken by a strange melancholy and his soul shrank into its shell with premonition of disaster. Venka was almost prepared to turn back to the mooring.

In the village, after he did not find the forester at

home—neighbours said he had gone off to the post office—Venka's spirits sank even lower. He scolded himself for hurrying so. Why had he rushed away, leaving Simagin alone, to say nothing of Zinaida?

He trudged to the riverbank. By the rick propped on piles, under the old flat-bottomed boat, small waves splashed lightly against the shore. Last year's hay had the spicy smell of decay. Venka pulled out a stalk and bit it, wearily looking at the opposite bank of the Irtysh, where the forester's hut stood in a cove beyond a rocky cliff.

"Must've changed his mind," thought Venka as he spat out the stem of grass. "You go like crazy for a week, dreaming and making plans, while he, old liar that he is, went back on his word."

Venka was so upset he was about to cry, for he had trumpeted the news for the whole factory to hear. There was also Simagin who relied on him. They'll have a good laugh—especially Torpedoboot. Venka decided he rather not show up at all.

Angry, he kicked off his shoes and climbed into the flat-bottomed boat, where a broken oar floated in the settled water. "I'll be damned if I don't talk the old goat round."

The clumsy tub moved in zigzags. You made a stroke on one side and it would turn round. Venka hurriedly brought it over to the other side, splashing himself with water. The boat began to spin. The waves lapped on and were liable to overturn the boat any minute. Every time the boat was sideways to the waves, Venka sat down and clutched at any object at hand.

God knows where the current would have taken him if it weren't for the motorboat. It darted out from beyond a small cape on the other side and crossed the river at an angle—heading towards him, a man, suffering disaster, instead of the village.

Venka dropped the oar and tucked his feet under him. It wasn't clear whether he was happy or confused when he saw that the old man sitting sideways to the motor, was the forester himself.

"Take me in tow, father!"

The motorboat circled round him, while the old man surveyed him with suspicion. Actually he didn't look very

old. True, he had flabby cheeks but his eyes were clear and quick. He wore his forester's cap with its oak leaves and green trimming slightly to one side.

"Resembles my dad a bit," thought Venka in surprise. "He, too, though he looks old and overworked, puts on youthful airs. No matter how cold it is, he always raises the flaps of his fur cap."

"Are you going to rescue me, father?"

"Haven't yet decided. I'll see."

"That's great."

"Could be greater."

"What am I to do, father? I'll drift all the way to the Arctic Ocean," Venka smiled ingratiatingly.

"Do what you like. Climbed into someone's boat..."

Venka got the wind up. Any moment now the forester would turn and head for the village.

"Maximych, I meant to row to your post. I've a note for you from Simagin." Venka fumbled in his pocket. "Here it is."

The motorboat finally drew up.

"Goodness!" sighed Venka, clutching the side of the motorboat. "You sure have a grudging hand, father."

He had time enough to thoroughly examine the boat while the old man was reading Simagin's note. Venka had a sinking sensation inside.

"Why do you need a boat, lad. Can't do without it?"

"It's my dream. I want to go boating."

"Fancy that!" the old man smiled with his eyes and looked at Venka's legs. Red as a plucked goose. Some sailor.

"Am I any worse than the others?" Venka sniffed.

His voice trembled, and the old man noticed it.

"Well, if you're no worse get into my boat."

It was as if some spring had been loosened. A minute ago Venka had been sitting languidly on the stern of the boat, his red feet dangling in the water, then—hop—he was in the motorboat, scaring the wits out of the old man.

"Not too fast..."

Venka grinned. "Let's get a move on."

As he was tying the flat-bottomed boat to the motorboat he bent over as though by accident, leaned against

the man's shoulder and touched the handle of the motor—his fingers went numb with impatience.

The old man drew Venka's hand away softly and took hold of the starter cord.

"Wait, don't fuss."

This didn't upset Venka: he was prepared to wait. He whistled, his eyes glued to the old man's hand, which handled the motor. Obeying an inexplicable urge, Venka leaned towards him and straightened out the wrinkled collar of his jacket with its green buttonholes and yellow oak leaves, like the ones he had on the cap. The old man coughed, apparently bewildered, and Venka drew a deep breath and suddenly struck up a song.

He wasn't too sure of the words and wondered at the choice he had made, so he soon began humming and looking at the old man with hope—perhaps he'll join in?

But the old man gazed at him in silence. He towed the flat-bottomed boat to the haystack, fastened it, and said as he changed places with Venka:

"Drive to the cove, to the milkmaids. Did you watch what I was doing and how?"

"For heaven's sake," mumbled Venka, "as if I didn't know."

He turned quite pale but did everything right. He even remembered to step on the gas, preparing the motor for more strain.

The boat obediently slid along the surface and Venka laughed quietly, feeling he was a part of it.

"Mother, dear!" he shouted when they got to the middle of the river, and turned the gas handle to the limit.

They were both doused with cold water and the wind whistled in their ears. The old man pressed his cap to his head, yet, though he would never have gone as fast as this himself, he didn't interfere. Venka threw his cap on the lattice under his feet, and the wind smoothed out his hair, light as flax, and glossy.

A pussy-willow branch whirled in the river's foam near the entrance to the cove. The motorboat sped by and Venka suddenly thought of Zinaida. Where is she now? What might she be doing? Probably crying, what else? What a life. Things never worked out as they should with the

two of them. They whirled round just like the pussy-willow branch.

Venka thought to himself: if he picked the pussy-willow out of the water at full speed, it would mean that not all was lost, that everything would turn out right in the end. But if he failed or, God forbid, tumbled overboard—it meant there was no hope.

“Hold on, Maximych!”

He turned the wheels abruptly and managed to swerve round in the narrow entrance of the cove. The small rocky cliff flashed by. The keel cut through the eddy and, fortunately, the willow branch was now to the right of the boat. Venka snatched it up with his free hand.

“Did you see that?” he laughed happily. Silvery drops trickled down the ash-grey catkins.

The old man said nothing. If anyone else had come up with a trick like that, he would have taken the wheel away instantly.

Venka again began singing, now at the top of his voice. The milkmaids left their cows and came running to the riverbank. Too bad Zinaida could not see him now!

He was so carried away he blundered—diminished the gas too rapidly, trying to avoid the shallows near the shore. He feared he might scratch the bottom of the boat against the pebbles. A wave made by their boat immediately caught up with them and doused Venka up to the small of his back.

“Goodness!” the milkmaids shouted. “Look at what he’s doing.”

Venka gave them a confused look, put his cap into shape by slapping it against his knee and pulled it on up to his eyebrows, the same as at the factory. He pretended he didn’t in the least mind the cold water, and jumped into the stream with his things on to push the boat to the shore.

“He must be drunk, girls!”

Venka couldn’t catch his breath from the cold. He stood upright, gasping, and inhaled. Soon he felt better and even lightly tapped the water with his palms.

That evening he fell asleep the moment he laid his head on the pillow. It was just like after a foul-up in the shop,

when you had to work like a horse at the chlorinator or the kiln.

But surprisingly enough he didn't have his usual dream about the shop. Nothing of the sort. And anyway, how many times can you have one and the same dream? It can become a real obsession.

He recalled that as he was taking off his things he was suddenly aware of the scent in the old man's hut, of odour he had nearly forgotten. It smelled of home. Not his home in town but his mother's and father's. You couldn't immediately make out the nature of this smell. It could have been the geranium on the windowsill or the damp whitewash on the walls. Or else the homemade strip of carpet on the painted floor, or the bed, soft, unlike those in town—light goosedown under a colourful cottonspread.

"And Maximych is the image of my father," the thought flashed through his mind before he saw another picture. This time of himself. He saw himself in a boat, propelling it with an oar. The clothes he wore looked strange—he was dressed like a sea captain. His shoulder-straps glittered bright.

He went down the river singing a song about the pussy-willow. That pussy-willow would not leave his mind.

He sat singing while Maximych, perched on the side of the boat, dangled his bare feet in the water and wept bitterly. Just imagine, thought Venka in his dream, how touched Maximych is by my song, he's listening to it and crying. Then Maximych asked: "Venka, where did you learn my favourite song?"

"All the drinks we had, celebrating my purchase of the boat!" Even in his dream Venka felt surprised. "I wept myself, though I don't remember what about."

Now that its purchase had been "celebrated", the boat went even more smoothly. Wouldn't it be fun to go in it to the end of the world, even if Venka didn't clearly know what for.

"What do you mean, 'what for'?" Simagin shouted from far away. "You're going to rescue me." He was caught in somebody's nets and Venka just couldn't grab hold of them: he tried to reach out for them but they sunk deeper

underwater; Torpedoboat had caught them with a hook and was pushing them under and there was nothing Venka could do to help.

Then he heard Sanya Ivlev's voice:

"Help me, me, Venya!" Sanya, badly burned, climbed out of the chlorinator and stretched out his arms towards Venka. Everything but the cap on his head was burned. "Don't leave me, friend, I'm completely lost without you."

Venka felt sorry for his army mate, he felt sorry for everybody, and he advised Sanya: "Stop up the burned hole with your diploma. You've got a diploma now, don't you remember?"

Sanya disappeared in the milky white tetrachloride and in his place Raissa was standing on the shore waving her kerchief.

"Where are you from, looking so handsome?" she asked.

"From down south, from Sochi," he replied. "I'm a sea captain. Can't you see? Get in while my wife isn't here."

"You sure you're not going to deceive me?"

"Me, you can trust."

But as soon as she climbed into his boat Zinaida appeared out of the blue.

"Hi, captain, take all your things. I'm going to live with my son!" she cried.

Though he was sleepy he remembered at once: "She's decided to go to Valerik, near Krasnodar. I have a son living there with my mother-in-law. Let's go there together and we'll set Raissa ashore on an uninhabited island."

He began making signs to Zinaida—get in, hurry up!—but she just flung something heavy into the boat. It was a suitcase—no, an album full of pictures. It used to lie around in the store-room. All the pictures were scattered about in the water and caught up by the current. The three of them—he, Zinaida and Valerik, were floating down the river...

Wasting no time, he pulled off his captain's uniform and jumped into the water. The water stung his body. He was borne away by the current. He began waving his arms but the waves swept over him. He wanted to scream but his voice wouldn't obey. His heart pounded so hard it was

ready to burst. It was then that he saw Torpedoboot aiming its gun at him.

"Don't shoot, mate!" he yelled. His voice was there again. "Don't shoot, I'll make you a titanium screw."

Torpedoboot's teeth flashed and the next minute there was a resounding explosion. It echoed painfully in his temples and in his sleep Venka realised somebody really had fired.

Getting his eyes open, Venka propped himself on his elbows and looked out of the window. A motorboat was going in circles around the cove, grey from the thick fog. In it someone was holding the wheel with one hand and a raised gun with the other. He was aiming at somebody on the go but there was no telling who it might be.

"Is he hunting?" Venka wondered. On shore, behind some bushes, he saw Maximych. The old man was waving his arms and looked as if he was shouting something. Venka walked out onto the porch. There was another discharge—the shot hit the water and Maximych swore with vigour.

"That must be a poacher," Venka thought anxiously, still half-asleep. He felt his heart beginning to pulsate. "So this is the way it happens."

He remembered Simagin at once and as if it were he, Tolya, who had to be saved, dashed into the hut, with a jerk lifted the motor which stood in the corner and, having placed it on his shoulder, ran to his boat. The poacher took notice of him and unwillingly turned in the direction of the river.

"Don't follow him!" Maximych rushed over. "We've chased him away and that'll do. It's you I'm talking to, don't make a fuss."

"Who was he shooting at?"

"A mink. Look there..."

A glossy brown animal was swimming towards the shore. Upon reaching the shingle, the lithe little cat darted onto the bank and disappeared into the bushes.

"Did you by any chance notice whether he had false teeth?" Venka asked.

"Who?"

"What d'you mean 'who'? The one who did the shooting."

Maximych smiled grimly.

"Most of them here have false teeth. Better stay away from their kind. I beg you . . ."

The evening before Venka could only think of his boat, but now he recalled what Simagin had told him about Maximych the forester. During the last few years the old man had begun chasing poachers. Actually it was none of his business, but the tough gang that had sold their honour made him lose patience. Maximych acted without any papers and he succeeded in taking away traps and nets from even the most inveterate poachers. He caught them off their guard. The previous summer they had ruined his motorboat. It didn't have a powerful motor and the boat, too, was a homemade wooden thing, but still it was too bad.

All this didn't stop Maximych. He once tracked down three unwanted guests hunting for roe deer and decided to lie in wait for them. He was all alone. And it wasn't an old man's job. He waited in ambush among the firs for over twenty-four hours. Nearly kicked the bucket. It was dreadfully cold and he was chilled to the bone, but still they didn't come. At dawn he finally heard the snow crunching under somebody's feet in the hollow. Maximych opened his eyes with difficulty, his lashes being frozen together, and glanced towards the sound—there they were, walking Indian file with deer carcasses on their backs. With the moon out, they were well visible and at a distance resembled wolves prowling amidst the white snow. Three figures, one after the other. Maximych climbed out from behind the firs and realised he couldn't get the rifle off his back—so frozen was he, his hands wouldn't obey him. "Halt, boys," he said, "that's the end of the hunt." The first one, who seemed to be their leader, shifted his feet in bewilderment and without thinking twice gave him a stunning blow with a deer carcass, stone-hard from the frost. He might very well have killed him if it weren't for the cold; Maximych came to and managed to crawl back to his hut.

But this was not all. The previous spring someone had

set fire to the dry brushwood, and the flames had reached the post. Maximych saved his home by a miracle. Just before the river froze over someone had knifed his cow with calf and his year-old bull. Maximych sold the meat of the ruined animals and with Simagin's help bought himself a duraluminium boat and a powerful second-hand motor. Who knows how it would have all ended had his old woman not died in the winter and Maximych aged considerably. He was more and more often unwell. "My fight is over, I've had enough," he told Simagin, "the only thing left for me to do is to guard the stove I lie upon." By this spring the old man had made up his mind to sell the boat, retire and leave for some place on the Volga—his birthplace, though by now hardly any of his kin lived there.

"I've got my own head on my shoulders, Maximych," said Venka. "You don't have to tell me whether I should stay away from them or not."

"Then this is what you'll get instead of the boat," said Maximych, giving him the fig. "You haven't given me the whole sum, anyway. Just half of it. So cool down a bit."

Venka was taken aback.

"You're not one to make a chap bored, Maximych."

"You, too, are a jolly fellow. You won't die your own death..."

"And what about Tolya?" Venka thought of Simagin and, getting seriously angry at the old man, said with irritation:

"Look here, Maximych. Don't exercise your wit on me. It's not for fun I'm taking the motorboat. Don't you get it? I want to help Simagin." In his mind's eye Venka saw Torpedoboot looking at him and Tolya with a mocking smile, quite sure of his own invulnerability. "I'll gladly take your advice in anything, but as for the motorboat and all the rest of it—there I'm my own master."

The old man hunched his shoulders and stood blinking in confusion, and Venka felt sorry about the whole thing. Not knowing what to say or do, he suddenly felt like giving him a hug but was too embarrassed and looked away instead.

"I'll take him to town with me," Venka thought. "He

could work on the mooring. At least he wouldn't feel as lonely there."

"Should I go to the Irtysh? What if my Zinaida comes early? She threatened she would." He smiled, giving Maximych a quick glance.

"You don't say!" Maximych now felt better and the exclamation almost sounded merry. "Look what's going on. She must be a chaser."

"What's that?"

"Well, one of those who chase after their husbands."

"Ah, perhaps a bit. That's the way she is..."

Without adding another word, Venka started the motor. He had to move very slowly because of the thick, low fog. The rocks to his side, their tops coloured pink by the invisible sun, seemed to float on top of white clouds. Closer to shore a big fish was splashing heavily. Again Venka recalled Simagin. He must be hiding in some canal now, on the look-out for men with nets—this was the most cunning and quiet time.

As soon as the sun rose a bit higher above the peak of the forest-covered mound, the fog began to settle into the water. Venka grew cold in the river chill. He had to wait at the buoy for the drifting white particles of fog to fade away, just couldn't go farther as long as the channel was hidden from sight. Several metres away from him the hydrofoil flashed by, looting full blast. It oriented itself on the buoy lights, which were discernible from its high sides.

Hardly had Venka reached the landing, when somebody called for him from behind the purple willows.

"Could that be Raissa?" he wondered, amazed. "Sounds like her voice. Some turn of events..."

Peering at another female figure which was dimly visible on the landing, he slackened speed and slowly made for shore.

"Where have you sprung from?" he dumbly asked Raissa, who had walked out from behind the bushes. Meanwhile he kept looking askance at the landing.

"I came on the hydrofoil." Raissa smiled, intently studying his face. "I'm free today. Want to sunbathe on the other side. Will you take me across?"

Venka moved his toes, red from the cold.

"Some admirer I am." He grinned. "Barefoot but with a cap. When did I manage to put the thing on?"

Raissa got into the boat, wrapped her light raincoat about her and sat down. She realised she was in for trouble. But yesterday, after their ridiculous encounter near the factory gate-way, she had felt piqued and now couldn't resist the temptation of having a dig at Zinaida in return. She had hailed a taxi and followed the trade-union car to the dock. Here Raissa had seen the whole scene—how Venka had refused to take along his legitimate wife and how Zinaida had cried, smearing the mascara on her eye-lashes. This spurred Raissa on and the next morning, without realising what she was doing, she had rushed to the mooring at the break of day and was the first to board the hydrofoil. Zinaida had noticed her and during the entire trip they had gazed at each other through a large round mirror hanging in the cabin. "Let her fume and rage," Raissa repeated to herself. "There was nothing really between Venka and me so why should I feel guilty."

Venka tarried a little, then pushed the boat away from shore and instantly heard a slightly hoarse voice, familiar to him in all its shades:

"Venya, wait!"

Zinaida stood at the edge of the landing, now distinctly visible through the fog. She had appeared as unexpectedly as a ghost. Truly, he had sensed it—he hadn't been mistaken when he had looked back all the time.

"Yes..." Venka smiled uncertainly. "You always come forth with those tricks of yours, Zinaida..."

"I see you, too, are trying to be up to the mark," Zinaida said in a breaking voice, and granting the quiet Raissa a contemptuous glance, she went along the river-bank waving her handbag. She looked as if her only purpose in coming here had been to take a walk by the river.

"Zina, what's wrong... you'd better get into the boat."

Venka began fussing about the boat and in his haste couldn't manage the oar properly. He scolded himself for not having first started the motor and approached his wife at his very best, surprising her with his skill. Then he

spat in disgust, flung away the oar and jumped out of the boat. Just like the day before, he found himself in the cold Irtysk water. But this time he was not aware of the cold—tripping on stones, he started pushing the boat towards solid ground and then downstream, trying to catch up with Zinaida.

"Zina, stop that... Get in. There's plenty of place for everyone," he blurted out most inappropriately. "Honestly, Zina, what's the matter with you... Listen," he turned to Raissa, "tell this nut that I met you here quite by chance. What's going on, for heaven's sake? Can't you hear, Zina? Well then, do as you please."

By now he had dropped behind. Badly bruising his bare feet, Venka finally shoved the boat up to shore and climbed onto the bluff—all wet and pitiful, his arms hanging loose.

Zinaida was almost running now. He was about to follow her but stopped, sat down on the grass and, banging his fist against the ground, covered his face with his palms and buried it in his wet knees.

The next day, towards evening, he left on his motorboat, having waited in vain for Simagin. He took the boat all the way to town.

The pussy-willow branch, no longer as downy as it had been, lay on the bottom of the boat. Looking at it, Venka recalled his prescient dream of the day before. It had worked out fine, no doubt about it. He had had a fight with his wife and hadn't met his friend. It couldn't have been worse.

For a long time he sat in the boat at the factory mooring, deserted at this late hour, trying to figure out what to do next. Actually he didn't feel like doing anything. "Perhaps I shouldn't have bought this thing after all," the thought flashed through his head. "What's so great about it anyway?—the motor roars right in your ear, it's enough to deafen you."

Above the gates the name of the factory mooring—"Titanium"—written in stainless steel strips, glittered in the twilight, lit by the moonlight and sparkling at the edges. Only now did Venka notice a man hiding in the shade behind the poplars.

"Hi, who's there? Is it you, Tolya?"

Venka jumped out of the boat and his old acquaintance—the police inspector who had come to the plant this spring—took a step towards him.

"What are you doing here?" asked Venka, his heart sinking.

The captain said nothing, either scrutinising him or listening to the distant sound of a boat motor somewhere down the Irtysh. The inspector already knew that Venka had gone to fetch the boat from the forester in the cove.

"Simagin's dead," he said. "They found his body down the river this morning."

For the next week Venka could hardly see what he was doing.

The kilns burned through two or three times, but the chlorinators held up, and he and Ivlev, the new shift mechanic, patched the kilns up as usual.

"Get it out of your head, for heaven's sake. What makes you think it's murder?" Ivlev tried convincing him. "Anything might have happened."

Venka made a wry face. Why should the man poke his nose into other people's affairs? He had never been on the river, didn't know what was what and here he was offering advice. Venka had already given a piece of his mind to one such smart aleck—the police inspector. Imagine doing a foolish thing like that: setting free Torpedoboat, who had been arrested in the heat of the moment. Fancy that, he had an alibi—the night Simagin died Torpedoboat was at his brother's wedding feast. They had parted till dawn—the whole house could witness to that.

Till dawn is a pretty elastic notion. Four o'clock is morning and seven, too, isn't yet daytime. And during those hours, while the sun is getting warm in the lee of the hills, one can go to the end of the world and back. Does it take long to go to the channels down the river by boat? And if you have a car handy you can easily get back in time to taste the wedding pancakes. Moreover, everybody will have the impression you were there all the time, never left the place for a moment.

Later the police inspector again began questioning Torpedoboat. Besides, he succeeded in getting the fishery inspection to put up a memorial to Simagin on the bank of the Irtysh. They did it in a hurry, and it was just a painted pyramid made of planks with a plywood star on top, but nevertheless it was a memorial. Like the ones they put up to honour soldiers.

Could Sanya Ivlev understand it all? Cooper, unlike him, agreed with Venka.

"No doubt about it," he said with vigour. "They did the inspector in. There was a dense fog, just the right occasion to square accounts with him."

Sad necessity brought Venka to the packing shop. He remembered that corks for barrels were being stamped there out of square titanium plates—they looked handsome and glittery and could be used to shape a star and a plate with an engraving, which would make the pyramid look like a real memorial.

Venka sat on his haunches next to a pile of blanks and with a piece of chalk drew a star on the plate he had chosen. It was then that Cooper took notice of him. He must have been idling behind the huge machines, so he came over at once, trying to see who was pottering about there without permission.

"Who do I see here! Hi, mate." He stretched out his hand to Venka and, bowing his head to one side, peered at the drawing "Is that for your boat?"

"What?" asked Venka.

"The star of course..." Cooper smiled and waited for an answer with an expression which indicated he had already guessed Venka's plan to decorate his boat with a titanium star. One could read it in his eyes that he, too, wouldn't have opposed the idea, for he was a great admirer of motorboats.

"What does it have to do with my boat?" mumbled Venka, frowning, but stopped in time, realising that Cooper was the master of this shop and could very well send him away, taking back the titanium plates. "How can you use such stars for a boat?" he asked in a softer tone and, not wanting the man to get offended, as if for the first time examined the plate with the white star on it. Perplexed,

he screwed up his eyes trying to imagine how the star would look if attached to the side of the boat. No, it was the wrong place for it.

Venka knitted his brows, caressed the cold metal with his palm and sighed.

"I want to place it on the memorial of an inspector friend of mine."

"What inspector?" Cooper asked with compassion, sitting down by Venka's side.

"He worked here, in the fishery inspection. A fine fellow he was, Tolya Simagin."

Venka purposely didn't utter the name at once; he thought that by drawing it out he would make the news sound even more sad. But Cooper didn't seem in the least surprised.

"Simagin, Simagin," he tried to place the name, pretending he knew every soul in the inspection. "Is he the tall lad who always wore a sailor's vest?"

Why did he have to think of the wrong person? Venka made a sour face:

"Oh, no . . . That one is a fitter from our shop. They teasingly call him Torpedoboat. Nothing will happen to that rascal in a hundred years. His kind doesn't burn or drown."

"Who is it then?"

"You know him, I'm sure." Venka was losing patience. "All boatmen know him, the whole Irtysh. He was in the car with us when you gave us a lift to the mooring. The time we were getting away from the women," Venka frowned still more vexedly, indicating he was in no mood for laughter and was merely forced to remind Cooper about the incident.

Cooper now remembered everything.

"That fellow? Died?" he whistled, only now comprehending the full meaning of the news. His eyes were fastened on the star. "Of course I knew him . . . He once helped me out with gasoline. I was caught in the dark, at the pontoon bridge with my motor stalled. You can't make head or tail of that place—you come upon shallows and then the current is fast again, and there are buoys all around. I was immediately turned stern frontward. When

you're whirled around you lose your sense of direction for good. There are lights everywhere on the water, the poles on the banks are lit up too, and you take them for buoys..." Cooper looked sideways at Venka, wanting to know what he thought of this episode. "A greenhorn would've had a hard time, you can be sure of that, but at the moment I..."

"How did he see the current whirl your boat?" interrupted Venka.

"Who do you mean?"

"Tolya Simagin, who else."

"Yes, of course... He did somehow." Cooper shrugged his shoulders. "His house is right by the bridge, you know that. Before I had time to do anything to get out of that mess myself, moor the boat to the shore, for instance, he came up to me in his boat. 'Anything wrong, friend?'"

Venka readily nodded his head as if he had known Simagin for years.

"That's the way he is, Tolya..."

"So he came closer. 'Follow me,' he said. And he moved on, right towards the pontoon bridge. The bridge, the devil take it, looked even bigger than it did in broad daylight—seemed to be glued to the water by its belly, without a crack to get through. But Tolya went on in high gear. And lit the way for me with a flashlight, so that I could follow right after him."

"So you didn't brush against the bridge?"

"We passed clean by it. And at full speed, too."

Venka smiled: "You said you had run out of gasoline. It was just that you didn't have the nerve, wasn't it?"

Cooper broke into laughter and shook his finger at Venka, but then he remembered what he had wanted to ask.

"So how did he meet his end, Tolya, I mean?"

Venka frowned and, falling silent, bit his chapped lips. He felt uneasy—how could they talk such nonsense, like two women at the market.

"How..." he mimicked Cooper. "Nobody saw him. They found the inspector's boat farther downstream than the channels. It was floating bottom up. Simagin himself they found near the Lokator."

"Is that near the spit?"

"Yes."

"But there is a camp grounds there on the bank and crowds of people around."

Venka gave a snort.

"Clear enough they didn't do him in there. Must have happened somewhere upstream."

He fixed his unseeing eyes at a star above as if trying to reckon up a second time if he and the captain hadn't blundered when they decided where to place the monument.

"I don't really know myself how it all happened," Venka made the sad admission.

He felt compelled to tell Gooper about Torpedoboat. Even if there wasn't really much he could say. What sort of a story was it?—nothing but some inner disagreement and no facts so far.

Cooper was tired sitting on his haunches and to Venka's immense surprise he slumped to the cement floor and stretched out his legs. Wasn't even afraid to spoil his new raincoat, or maybe forgot all about it for the moment.

"I can rack my brain all I want," Venka said unhappily.

Still, he was pleased to see that Cooper, unlike Sanya Ivlev, took this tragic event so much to heart. The worst thing is when you've nobody to consult with or pour your heart to. Cooper, it seemed, had well guessed his feelings.

"Couldn't you choose a bigger blank?" he said to Venka with reproach.

"You think this one's too small?"

"Does it look big to you? The star should be seen from far away, clear?"

Venka looked at Cooper with gratitude.

"You're right here."

"With time we'll make the inspector a new monument, too."

Bossy overtones, so familiar to any worker, were now discernible in Cooper's voice, and Venka, without being aware of it, immediately braced himself and was all attention. He was filled with an inner, long accumulated urge to start doing something.

"I want to get some periwinkles," he said. "It's a plant with nice blue flowers. Let it grow on his mound. That'll please him."

"Who will it please?" asked Cooper. "You don't mean Simagin, I hope?"

"Who? Perhaps him. How do we know?..."

Cooper looked at him attentively but didn't say a word.

They changed the draft in no time, then cut out the star and before taking the blank to be welded, decided to polish it with paste.

In the small neglected tool shop which was separated from the main shop by a plank door, Venka cleverly varnished the plates on a polishing ring. Cooper, who was attentively watching him at work, suddenly offered Venka to make a transfer to the fifth shop and become an adjuster.

"You mean to start making barrels?" laughed Venka. "There's nobody but women working here. Some job. They would be tickled pink."

"Don't hurry, think first," Cooper persisted. "For one thing the air here is quite clean," he said, noisily inhaling and closing his eyes with mirth. "No gas around at all. The only odour in the shop is the smell of perfume," he winked at Venka. "Then again, you're your own master. More important—you get the seventh rating and the same wages you had in the chlorinator shop. Don't you like the setup?"

Venka snickered and waved his head.

"No Bob, not for anything." Then he looked at Cooper's upset face and feeling sorry for him concluded evasively: "If you at least had a conveyor instead of those ridiculous pedals. It can be done in one way or another. Some problem, making barrels, when they make artificial satellites..."

He grimaced showing there was no point in continuing the useless conversation but Cooper, figuring at once how things stood, grew animated:

"You put your finger on it—we're planning to carry out a complete modernisation of the shop. We can't work like artisans all our lives, can we? You know how many barrels we've got to make? You could've joined in and started with

adjusting the new, modernised equipment. Could've invented something while you were at it, improved things, so to say . . . My word of honour!"

At this point Venka was at a loss—he wasn't that much tempted but he was just figuring out to himself: "That wouldn't be a bad idea. Titanium is one thing—it's nothing but chemistry. You walk round the chlorinator like a dumb fool. Here they work with mechanisms, you see it all—shafts and cog-wheels. I could use my brains and be no worse than the rest. And Ivlev and me will be sort of equal again: no way of telling which one is ahead of the other."

"Let's do it this way, Bob," he said to Cooper in parting, "you get your new equipment and meantime I'll give it all a thought."

Cooper was a good guy and Venka would hate to offend him.

On seeing Sanya Ivlev at the door, Venka was lost for words.

"May I come in?" he smiled in embarrassment.

"Sure, come in. Why ask?"

Before, Sanya would never ask and sometimes wouldn't even ring the bell—he just opened the door and entered as he would his own home. At one time even Zinaida grew so accustomed to him that she would walk around in her dressing-gown and not think of changing.

But all that was in the past . . .

"How did you make up your mind?" Deep at heart Venka was very glad to see Ivlev, but still he could not hold back an ironic remark.

"What about did I make up my mind?" Ivlev didn't seem to grasp his meaning.

"About dropping over at my place."

"That's something to say. As if I never come," Ivlev uneasily perched on the edge of the sofa, his eyes studying the room. "Oh, you've got yourself a new television set. What's the model?"

Venka stood in the middle of the room, his arms crossed on his chest, and questioningly looked at Ivlev.

"What's the matter?" Ivlev could no longer bear his gaze.

"Nothing really. Talking about the television set..." Venka snickered. "What did you come for?"

"Have you gone out of your mind?" Ivlev's eyes became round.

"I see you didn't come just like that, you've got some business."

"What makes you think so?"

"It's the way you sit. Sideways. On the very edge."

Ivlev looked around—what was wrong with the way he was sitting? He was, actually, sitting like a poor relative, or still worse like a man who had come to raise a row.

"Haven't we all become a bit crazy?" he laughed. "Never do things right, notice all sorts of nonsense in others and think it refers to us."

He moved to the centre of the sofa and leaned against the back.

"Is that any better?"

"That's another story."

Venka felt a burden fall off his shoulders. Ivlev's relaxed voice reminded him of the happy time when they used to get together evenings with their wives and play the fool and enjoy themselves. Sanya was great at telling jokes. It's only now that he hears nothing from him but "the shop... chloride titanium... kilns... the plan... the operating schedule..." That's why Venka couldn't stand the thought that Ivlev came over not because they were old friends, but because of some business connected with their shop.

"Aren't you a queer sort," Ivlev said already in the kitchen, as he was pouring out the wine he had brought along. "If I had some business I would have just given you a call. And then there are other things to think about except the shop. Otherwise we'll all go crackers. Amn't I right?" he said and broke out into laughter, as if trying to convince Venka he was saying all this for no particular purpose, just on the spur of the moment.

Venka immediately noticed this note of insincerity in Ivlev's voice but he preferred to ignore it. Thanks anyway for saying it. He answered with a smile, gulped down the wine and for an instant froze in his chair with his eyes

closed, as though he were listening to something within himself. Then he looked up at Ivlev.

"A good thing you came over. You see what our life has become like..." His eyes began to shine with excitement. "You don't even feel like having a drink or two. Isn't it true?" Venka shrugged, apparently marvelling at this strange fact.

They were both silent for a while. Water from the tap was dripping into the sink. They could hear the jingle of a tram outside.

"What do you say to a game?"

Ivlev couldn't quite understand what Venka meant and looked at him inquiringly—what game do you mean?

"Would you like to play chess?"

"Ah! Well, of course, why not," Ivlev sighed quietly and looked at his watch.

He had a blank expression in his eyes and didn't seem to be thinking about chess at all. Perhaps he had even forgotten about his, Venka's, presence.

Venka's spirits sank. This is how it is—hard as you try, there is no way of restoring their old relations. Honestly speaking, he wasn't that merry himself. Though he had been chattering all evening long, something was gnawing at his heart.

"Now tell me frankly, Sanya, what did you come for?"

Ivlev frowned. It wasn't something he could explain in a few words. When he decided to drop in at Venka's he wanted to believe he was going with no particular aim in mind, just the way it used to be—he would come as an old friend and that was all there was to it. He might go home five minutes later or stay the whole evening, it was all the same. What will be, will be. But already at the door, when he saw Venka's lost expression, Ivlev realised that the longer he puts off the conversation which was bound to take place, the more difficult it will be to start it.

"You're a queer sort," he again tried to laugh off the question. "What if we did talk a bit about work? What's so terrible about it, tell me? You're just like a child who is afraid to listen to frightening fairy-tales before going to bed. Will you have nightmares about the chlorinator shop?" Ivlev raised his voice without giving Venka a chance to

collect his wits. "From some time on you've begun to dread any talk about work. Is that the way it should be?"

Venka waved his head. He leaned against the chair, took a fork, poked it into a slippery mushroom cap and smiled crookedly: come on, speak up, I'll listen . . .

And then, suddenly, he smiled happily and without reserve, as if Ivlev's eyes said something nice to him, something contrary to what his lips had just pronounced.

"You guessed that part about the nightmare," he said cheerfully, leaving Ivlev baffled. "Looks like I have dreams to order. My Zinaida keeps seeing palm-trees on the sea-shore in her dreams, or beautiful houses with white columns—in short, all sorts of lovely things. She had never in her life been to a resort, so it's nice seeing it all in a dream. I wouldn't mind it myself, especially if there was in addition a mermaid walking along the shore . . ."

"Someone like Raissa," Ivlev put in.

"Let it be someone like her," Venka didn't blink under his friend's glance. "Main thing is that she look like a girl come down from a picture. Not like our peevish wives, mine or yours."

"Come on, tell me what dreams you have?"

Venka heaved a sigh.

"All I dream of is the shop, the first shop, to be exact."

"Hm, and it's a full copy of our shop?"

"Exactly."

Ivlev followed Venka's fork, which was still trying to catch the slippery mushroom, and asked a silly question:

"Do you dream of something concrete that takes place only in our chlorinator shop, or just about things referring to the factory on the whole—say, some tubes or retorts?"

"That's the thing, Sanya, it's quite concrete. Yesterday, for instance, I dreamed about the fifth chlorator and today about the sixth . . ."

Ivlev lifted the mushroom from the plate with his fingers, threw it into the sink and took away Venka's fork.

"Back at your kidding?"

"I'm quite serious."

"But how could it be possible?" Ivlev exclaimed after some deliberation.

"How do I know?" Venka shrugged. "One thing I can say

is that I go through two emergencies, once in the shop and the second time at home, in my dream. With all the details."

"So it's something like a film in many parts?" Ivlev smiled unwillingly, still thinking Venka was just making fun of him.

"It's far better," his friend said waving his hand. "I see such stories about myself that I break into a sweat. In the morning I might just as well wring out my tee-shirt."

"So you dream of nothing but emergencies?"

"Absolutely."

"Which means you perform heroic deeds in your dreams as well?"

"What d'you mean?"

"You know that better than I do. You rush headlong to the chlorinator, so as to cover up the burned place with your body."

Venka screwed up his eyes.

"And what am I supposed to do in your opinion? Wait for you to help? With all your education I'll have to wait long before you collect your wits and gather what is what..."

Ivlev gave a forced laugh with an air of a man who was not going to lose his temper no matter what insolent remarks he would have to hear.

"I was just wondering, Venka, what you will be dreaming of when the chlorinators stop exploding... What are you going to do then with your heroic profession?"

"And why should they stop exploding?"

"That's the way it should be. They've got to work rhythmically, according to a set programme. Like a good watch—tick-tack, tick-tack," Ivlev waved his finger as if it were a pendulum.

Venka fixed his eyes at Ivlev's raised forefinger, its nail yellow from tetrachloride, and then looked him in the face with surprise.

"A chlorinator that will never explode! Kilns that will never burn through! Do you understand what you're saying? You've got an engineer's diploma after all, you should know better."

"That's why I think of it all as an engineer."

"Just fancy, he's thinking. With this level of technological development and there being no foul-ups in a shop like the chlorinator one? How can that be possible when you, engineers, haven't even learned how to reduce the heat?"

"That's right. We haven't so far. But we will."

"When will that be? You don't mean you'll do it during this five-year plan period?" Venka said sarcastically.

"Not in this one. But maybe the next. We will have new highly-educated experts, new technical ideas and new technological lines."

"Oh, of course," smiled Venka, "knowledge is light. Only what are we going to do with the uneducated?"

"This is just what I was going to talk to you about. Before it's too late."

"Before it's too late?" Venka repeated with feigned surprise.

"Exactly. Before it's too late. You've got to study. You've had enough of playing the fool. Pretending you were some creator. Why not, you're the centre of the universe..." said Ivlev, growing more and more animated and finding words that would sting Venka most. Though Venka realised he was right, he could not hold back his temper.

"Go and study!" he hissed. "I've lived half my lifetime, tried it the hard way and now, instead of letting me have a rest at long last, you want to place me at a school bench? And this, you say, is my salvation? Well, thanks for your kindness..."

"But there's no other way out!" Ivlev banged his fist on the table so that the plates rattled. "Can't you understand that much?"

Venka carefully moved the plates further from the edge of the table and after some deliberation asked quietly:

"Why all this shouting. We'll scare the wits out of my neighbours. 'You've got to study...'" he mimicked Ivlev. "It's become a fixed idea with you. Those who should, study, and those who shouldn't. The main thing is to get a diploma. Don't take me for a perfect fool, Sanya. You seem to think Venka Komrakov is no better than a blind puppy, never gives a thought to serious things. You're wrong here. I did my share of thinking and more than once. I thought

about it this way and that . . . Racked my brains till they were ready to burst. But what's the use? After such thoughts you feel like hanging yourself. It's easy to say—start from scratch. If I had at least ten years of school . . . But I didn't even finish the eighth grade."

Why did he have to say all this? As if Sanya didn't know all there was to know about his former life and the reason he quit school.

Such was the situation in their family. The only breadwinner was their father who worked in a smelting shop. His wages weren't that big, especially if you took into account the large family he had to feed. There were five of them in addition to their father. Their mother was busy taking care of the children. So when Venka started his eighth year at school he had to tell his folks he was going to quit and start working at the factory. His father seemed very much upset but finally had to agree. This was how Venka ended his studies once and for all. Before military service he was a fitter in the assembly shop. He would come home in the evening feeling so exhausted that even the prospect of going to dances didn't make him feel any better. He couldn't even think of proceeding with his studies . . .

"Of course, it all seems so easy and simple to you," said Venka in an injured voice. "You've been through school the way everybody does, as a child. Didn't have to worry about earning a living. Then, in two summers, you sat for your college entrance examinations until you were drafted in the army. You got the knack of it and you also had the required knowledge. And what was I to begin with? The school room? Such schooling would've completely worn me out. And after that I'd still have to sweat at it for years. What for? In order to become a no-good engineer at forty, just like your technologists?" Venka smiled derisively. "Thanks, but I'd rather work with my hands and do a good job. It's o'key, don't worry. There will always be enough nuts and wrenches for my time. You've got a diploma, but still you wouldn't be able to do a thing in the first shop without us, fitters. What are you, Sanya, without us anyway?" Venka laughed again, trying to switch over to a lighter tone.

"Me? I'll get along fine without you," Ivlev retorted. "If not today, then in five or ten years at the most. But you will get nowhere without the engineers. You fancy you do some creative work with your winged metal... But actually you're just an assistant, do whatever odd job you're given."

Venka's countenance changed.

"Was that why you came over," he said tensely, "to tell me all this?"

Ivlev was now prepared for the worst. He felt a small vein on his temple beginning to throb as if it were ready to burst. He hesitated for a while, then rose and made for the door.

Venka followed him with his eyes. Then he banged the back of his head against the window frame, clenched his teeth and screwed up his eyes till they began to hurt.

Cooper was extremely glad to see him.

"I was sure you'd finally make up your mind," he said, giving Venka a crushing handshake and looking him straight in the eye. "You won't slip up on this, I bet. Everything'll be o'key."

Venka eased his benumbed fingers as he withdrew his hand, and then he looked around the shop uneasily, listening to its sounds and inhaling its smell anew.

From all sides came the clang and rattle of machinery, which struck a harsh note after the gentle hum of the chlorinators in the other shop. The strong jaws of the shears carved the metal sheets with a sharp noise—the scraps piling up on the floor with a clinking rattle. A plump young woman worker unhurriedly took each blank in a mittened hand, pushed it into the roller and while the next sheet was being curved into a cylinder, managed to have a good look at Venka and Cooper.

"It really calls for nothing but pressing a pedal," Venka snickered. "Just shove in a blank and push the pedal down. That's all there is to it. No wonder only girls work here. And Cooper is their boss. Oh, sorry, there's another man idling over there—doesn't know where to take a nap."

"Who's that?"

"Who d'you mean?" Cooper asked eagerly. "That fellow over there? He's a foreman. He has to take on extra work as a fitter, so he doesn't like it. Thinks it's too much of a good thing."

"This conveyor thing," asked Venka diverting his eyes, "when are you planning to start work on it?"

"What conveyor? Ah... We'll start very soon. As for you, you'd better not waste time, so get working at once. We badly need cans for titanium paint. You've got to help us out. You're our last hope."

"What cans do you mean?"

"One-litre ones. You see, we get them from a factory, but supplies are irregular and we lose a lot of time. We're beginning to think of carrying paint in our own coat pockets," said Cooper attempting a joke, when he saw that Venka was becoming gloomy.

"How am I going to make those cans for you without a conveyor?" Venka blurted out. He just couldn't get his mind off the damn thing. "You think I can make them with my bare hands? I'm not a tinsmith, you know."

"Of course not. Why do it with your bare hands? We've got to make a special tool for it. To fix the lids and bottoms of the cans. Why should I be telling you all this anyway, you know what's what better than I do," Cooper said laughing as he tried to put his arm on Venka's shoulder.

Venka moved slightly away—but in a manner that would not give the man offence—and Cooper scarcely touched him.

"There won't ever be a conveyor in this place," thought Venka as he looked around the shop miserably. "There'll be nothing but these women pushing pedals. Looks like I've got myself into a mess."

It was not yet late to give up the whole thing though he had volunteered for the job himself. He was not tied to Cooper, after all. He could just walk out...

But instead Venka said with a sigh:

"Very well, Bob. If we've got to, we'll make those cans. Me, you can trust.

There were rare moments when Venka suddenly felt sorry for Zinaida, who was tired of his carryings-on.

"Why so blue, Zina," he would say, lightly passing his fingers over her hair. "Cheer up, old girl. Take it easy."

As he walked by into another room, he stopped near his wife and patted her gently on the back. Venka's calloused hands seemed extremely soft. They would then linger on her shoulder, and he would look into Zinaida's eyes.

She, in turn, would look back unblinkingly and her pupils seemed to grow even larger. Venka, feeling embarrassed at his show of gentleness, would start telling her of things that vaguely troubled him:

"Just fancy, Zina, that Cooper fellow saw it coming. He must have second sight. Remember him saying he'd get me transferred into his shop? That was a good bet..."

Least of all had Zinaida expected the conversation to take such a turn, and her eyes at once lost their lustre.

"Nothing surprising about it. Who with would he go down the Irtysh, if not you?" she said mockingly as she pushed Venka's hand off her shoulder. "There are only two of you, go-as-you-please single lads. Just you two on the whole mooring."

Feeling hurt, Venka frowned. If there was one thing he couldn't stand, it was these outbursts of Zinaida's.

How could she be expected to understand their men's interest in boats? She looked at his hobby with a lack of seriousness typical of all women—he was often away at the mooring only because Cooper, always at odds with his wife, was anxious to go anywhere but home and had made himself a companion out of his own fitter. His *own* fitter. She sure had a biting tongue! But worst of all was that she connected his absence in the evenings, when he went to the mooring straight from work, with the existence of another woman in his life.

"Honestly, you're just as bad as Nikolai Sanych, our trade union chairman—both of you are haunted with the idea of women-intruders," Venka made a hopeless gesture. "Even if there was this affair with Raissa... it was, of course, only because I was young then and stupid. Do you have to reproach a man with blundering for the rest of his life? And anyway, what sort of a conversation is this? I tell you a word and you have ten others hidden up your sleeve."

"I don't see what's so wrong about my sleeve? All I know is you were such terribly close friends with Cooper and now you blame him and call him names for getting you transferred to his shop."

"Wrong . . . right . . . what does it have to do with that? As if I needed this Cooper fellow, as if I had anything to gain from his friendship . . . Did I impose myself on him? No, not me. If it weren't for the monument to Tolya Simagin . . ."

"Sure, it's all the fishery inspector's fault," Zinaida remarked jeeringly. "As if he couldn't find a more proper time to get drowned . . ."

"He didn't get drowned, he perished," Venka flared up. "If you're so clever, tell me how would I have found myself in the fifth shop if it weren't for the monument?"

But Zinaida was not that easy to pacify.

"Stop throwing dust in my eyes!" Zinaida fanned the flame. "As if I didn't know you had a squabble with Ivlev. He's trying to make all of you, fitters, go and study. This got your dander up—and you ran off to your friend Cooper, ready to start making barrels."

"Isn't this taking it too far? . . ." Venka nearly choked with rage. "You, with your eight years of school telling me about the need to study?! No doubt you had long forgotten both the alphabet and the multiplication-table! . . ."

"Now tell me, is there any justice in this world?" thought Venka as he stared at his wife, his hands crossed on his chest. "Now she'll say all those wise things about the importance of studying, but if I were really to apply myself, she'd be the one to kick up a shindy. It's clear as day. The spiteful woman will at once turn things inside out: must be you're losing your mind because of some skirt or other. This time it looks like she's an engineer, so you've begun dreaming about getting an education. Little by little these women'll make a real scholar out of you."

Zinaida was silent, and sensing no opposition Venka unwittingly changed the subject to what he was going to say when his wife interrupted him. Looking at Zinaida with reproach, he recalled this and that—first the monument, then Tolya Simagin, and finally, quite unaware of it, he began thinking of what was uppermost in his mind—his

boat. He had new things to worry about now. To make things even worse, the new motor was not working as it should . . .

"Must be the bobbin's out of order," he mused aloud, wagging his head.

Zinaida smiled with the corner of her lips, and sniffed bitterly as if to say that such a shift in the subject was to be expected.

"Really and truly, it can be nothing but the bobbin," Venka seemed to be addressing some invisible interlocutor and to make himself more comfortable he perched on the sofa, afraid to frighten away the sudden thought with an awkward gesture. "Just you tell me," he exclaimed, urging his wife to be a witness, "what the devil did I change the motor for? . . ."

For a while Venka was quiet and absorbed in his thoughts, either with pleasure, or with remorse recalling how the week before, without second thought, he decided the fate of the boat motor which the trade union committee had acquired for the workers. Of course, it was wishful thinking to assume that anyone who wanted could take a ride in the trade union motorboat. Never fear! It had only one master—Nikolai Sanych. He took care of it and kept a sharp eye on it, as if the boat was his own. This was why when Nikolai Sanych asked Venka to give the motor a running-in, Venka changed the two motors on the quiet: he adjusted his rusty and worn out motor case on the brand new trade union engine, so not a soul could guess what was what. Everything was tip-top and he did not even have to bother with the running-in.

"But a rascal always receives his just deserts," snickered Venka. Didn't even use the new motor—something went wrong from the very start. It breaks down at the most inappropriate moment, where the current is most swift; while Nikolay Sanych, the devil take him, sails without any troubles, praising Venka's good work, repeating how well he had done the running-in.

"D'you want to know why I did it?" he asked Zinaida. "I felt I deserved far more than such a trifle for the years I spent at the factory, working in the same shop. What is more, in the shop which is the most important one at the

factory. But the trouble is that I won't get this well-deserved present before I become an old man and go on pension, and then I may need it no more than a dead horse needs a flogging. Besides, if you look into the matter," Venka peered at the floor with wide-open grey eyes as if at that moment he was ready in all seriousness to comprehend some eternal truth, "you will see again that justice is on my side. For one thing," he ticked off on his fingers, "I need the motor to perform my public duty, not just for myself..."

"That's a sure thing," Zinaida interrupted him. "By now you must have given a ride to all the women in town."

"Listen, Kustitskaya, don't let your tongue run away with you. Mind you, I am a volunteer fishery inspector. I need good speed, so that no scoundrel can get away from me. That's in the first place. And in the second," Venka sluggishly ticked off on his fingers again but this time his squinted eyes had a firm and distracted look, which seemed to say that now as always they failed to have a heart-to-heart talk, "in the second, I could add a few words about Nikolai Sanych, our trade union chairman, who can't even oar properly, to say nothing about using the motor, but I don't feel like saying anything else. Let it be, as you say, that I take all sorts of women out for a ride..."

"Didn't you begin to say something about Cooper and the monument," Zinaida put in placatingly, having lost hope that Venka will of his own accord return to the subject of interest to her.

"Hm. I was just saying you shouldn't think I've got no will of my own. If I'm in the mood for it I can send Cooper to the devil."

"Why not do it then?"

But unlike in the morning Venka was no longer in a state of inner relaxation (that is what he called it himself), and besides it was time to go to work. He only waved his head:

"Oh, Kustitskaya, if I were to listen to you... Are *you* going to inhale the gas instead of me?" He was getting worked up, knowing ahead of time that only by yelling could he now stop this senseless conversation, nothing but a strain on the nerves,

Venka slammed the door so that the windows began vibrating and thumped heavily along the street as he passed their flat on the first floor—all this was designed to show his wife the state he was in because of her foolish reproaches. Look at your own doing: a person is off to work, and in what a mood! This fifth shop will be the end of him. Mind you, at first she even seemed happy about it. "Clean air", she said. "And you'll be getting the same salary."

"It's my fault too," Venka thought to himself. "Took up the first job I was offered. As if there was no other shop except this one, where they make casks."

Venka was not quite himself after the morning talk with Zinaida, which he must have started to celebrate the appearance of the sun that for a whole week had been hiding behind clouds. He felt so low, he was ready to skip work.

To make things worse, he met Ivlev on the way. Venka had already passed the gatekeeper's office and was going by the flower-bed, watered early in the day, when he heard Ivlev's voice.

"Stop for a sec... Where to are you running?" Ivlev must have noticed him at the bus stop, or in the bus itself, but he either could not approach him in the crowd, or else was unwilling to start a serious conversation in front of other people. Now, as he tried to catch up with Venka, he was simultaneously attempting to pull something out of the pocket of his jacket. "I don't remember you running like this to our chlorinator shop..." he made a forced joke, apparently trying to regain his calm and make it seem they had never quarrelled.

"You're right. I'm just afraid somebody might steal our barrels," Venka smiled back uneasily, suddenly feeling a bit disturbed, and not so much by the encounter itself, as by Ivlev's embarrassment. He now walked slower along the very edge of the pavement, side by side with Ivlev. His half-turned head was intended to show that he was prepared to hear out his unexpected companion.

"You've got to keep a watchful eye on these folks. No doubt about that," smiled Ivlev,

"It's no joking matter—they keep stealing our barrels, and there's no stopping it."

"That's just what I meant," Ivlev agreed seriously. "It'll soon be fall. People will begin to pickle vegetables for the winter."

"Of course. And besides, our barrels have got first-rate steel," Venka sounded as if he were defending himself. "Stainless steel it is, nothing'll happen to it if it stands with pickled vegetables for a hundred years."

"That's exactly what I mean."

What a man! Got a nice dig at him in passing and was now happily walking along as if the only reason he had stopped Venka was to compare his new job with god knows what.

But the first and fifth shops, located as they were across the road from each other, were already close at hand, and they both realised it was high time to leave the darned barrels alone, for a lot of time might pass before they had another chance to talk.

It was a very embarrassing situation. They had not really quarrelled. It had been give-and-take in the kitchen, and after that Venka had left the first shop. He had not said another word to Ivlev, only handed in his leave notice for Ivlev to sign, and Ivlev showed no surprise, did not ask him anything or try to persuade him to stay. He had not even detained him for the required twelve days. Now the bitterness had died down a bit, and the old feeling had returned. After all, their friendship had been a lasting one.

"I keep forgetting," said Ivlev producing a batch of white square papers with the factory stamp on them. "I wanted to give you these slips."

"What slips?" Venka frowned though he saw very well that Ivlev had in mind the free milk and yoghurt issued to the workers of the chlorinator shop.

"Don't you know? The same you always got," Ivlev handed him half the batch, having shoved the other half back into his pocket.

"It would be interesting to know how I'm related to your shop now. The air in our fifth shop is clean, and we'll get along fine without any milk."

"That's so, but they gave them to me again for you."

"Don't the office boys know that I've transferred to the fifth shop?"

"They should know. How could they not?"

"Then what's it all about?"

"It's about the slips!" Ivlev insisted merrily. "I signed a paper that I received them, and now I'm obliged to hand them over to you. I can't throw them in the waste-basket, can I? So you'll have to drink your milk whether you like it or not!"

"He's testing me," Venka thought to himself in admiration. "He's pretending that I haven't really left them, and am just helping the fifth shop for the time being."

"You know what, Sanya," he said in a dry, business-like tone. "Take them back where you got them. It's all a mistake."

He stood in the middle of the road in confusion, cursing himself with all his heart. To tell the truth, he had no desire to leave Ivlev like that, without making up and having a serious talk. But it was not proper to stand there any longer: he had just destroyed Sanya's last hope, though that meeting was as important for Sanya as to himself.

"Why're you so haggard?" he suddenly asked Ivlev in a somewhat condescending tone, eyeing his burned-out, no longer black and not very thick eyebrows in embarrassment. "Troubles with your wife?"

"Why, no, everything's fine," Ivlev was also embarrassed. "You know we live in perfect harmony. She sends you her best regards by the way."

"Well, I'll be off."

"See you," Ivlev agreed easily as if they were parting for only a short time, and quickly and casually gave him his hand.

That was what Venka was waiting for from the very outset. He grasped his hand firmly, feeling how dry and hot Ivlev's palm was.

"So long..." Venka shook his hand several times as if saying: that's it, let bygones be bygones.

"I'll drop in at the end of the day," said Ivlev trying to conceal the joy in his eyes by screwing them up. "At about four, right?"

"Drop in, do!" Venka smiled toning down the pleasant embarrassment which had seized him.

He crossed the road at a trot, as if he were indeed in a hurry and disappeared behind the iron door of the fifth shop.

Venka faltered in the quiet darkness of the passage between the lathes, still silent and cold, without a single person next to them, and walked on slowly, so far unaware of his reluctance, unwittingly filled with a familiar feeling of anxiety which had now gripped him with increasing frequency.

He was tormented by a feeling of being ill-provided, which found no outlet. He knew that this feeling had been with him for a long time, since he had been working in the first shop. He had grown accustomed to this old, indefinite pain, and at times deceived himself thinking it had left him.

Now, after his meeting with Ivlev, Venka realised that the pain was going to be more acute than ever before.

A few minutes past eight, as soon as the whole women's team working in one shift had assembled, the lathes came alive. Venka heard and distinguished every one of them—from the cutter to the stamper—through the door of the tool shop. Everything was functioning as it should, and it could very well be that he would not be called until the end of the work day. In particular, since he had replaced the stamps yesterday evening, and now, for perhaps two days, they would be stamping not plugs, but upper covers with holes in them.

This was the only job of which Venka was not ashamed. It took quite a bit of sweat to do it, and he had to display his skill in order to detect the slightest clearances or tight spots which had to be eliminated.

But to tell the truth, any fitter with the third rating would be able to tackle the job, and Venka was constantly conscious that many people realised it; they did not tell him so much to his face, either because they were afraid of Cooper or did not want to insult Venka, or perhaps just didn't care to interfere in anything.

He felt still more ashamed when he thought about the other work he had to do during the day. The women called for him for the most trifling matters. "Venka, the joint on

the barrel does not come together firm enough," or "Venka, the corrugated part does not fit," and he would tighten a screw or loosen it, and everything would be all right again, and he would idle in his tool shop, not knowing where to apply his energies.

"I'm like a prisoner here," thought Venka. "You can go off your rocker with a job like this."

To fritter away the time, he would polish some titanium rods for a barbecue or cut out a case for a ball-point pen out of perspex. Then he would simply sit on a bench not sure whether he was thinking about something or just day-dreaming.

In addition, Zinaida took to making fun of him. It all started when the different premises of the shop were numbered for evacuation in case of a fire, and the tool shop received number eight; having learned this Zinaida mocked Venka by singing the same song, over and over again, one about a poor boy who sits locked up in cell number eight, weeping. God knows where she heard it.

Most of all Venka was upset by the fact that Ivlev should see him today in this strange situation: it would really seem as if he had done something wrong and had been given the worst job possible. Particularly frustrating was this lawful idleness which was part of the job. Ivlev would see through it all as soon as he appeared on the threshold.

Ivlev was not the person to be fooled: he was familiar with the set-up. The neatness of the tool shop, all the stainless steel shelves on which different tools—needed and unneeded in the fifth shop, the latter procured by Venka for future exigencies—hung in complete order each in its section, could deceive anyone else except Ivlev, in that his job was not a simple one, that the room was like the one the fitters of the first shop had, and that the job he would be called to do could be as serious and as dangerous as in the chlorinator shop.

In the afternoon, singing the same lyrics about cell number eight and the big lock, Venka set about replacing the inner sash of the window, and having pulled out the nails, removed the rusted bars which had long offended his sight.

He was engaged in this task when Cooper dropped in the

tool shop as usual. By a stroke of bad luck he was accompanied by the trade-union chairman.

Cooper looked at the bars in wonder, not realising right away where they had come from.

"I'm doing away with survivals of the past," grinned Venka, offering the chairman his hand, smudged with dust and spiderweb. "It's shocking! A plant of communist work. It says in white letters on red at the entrance, and we've got bars on the windows to protect us from ourselves."

Cooper screwed up his eyes in anticipation.

"Why are you so blue today, Komrakov?" he was used to calling Venka by his last name in the presence of other people, as if he were alienating himself from him just in case.

"I've got reason enough to be."

"What's wrong, did you replace the stamps?"

"I did yesterday."

"Did you adjust the rollers on the third lathe?"

"Replaced them and adjusted them, good grief."

"You're a quick one, then why the blue mood?"

Venka looked in sorrow at the wide windowsill, grown markedly bigger, where large blue flies lay between the window panes, trapped there a long time ago and now dead.

"I'm sick and tired of this puttering around," he wanted to tell his chiefs directly, but he only waved his hand hopelessly.

Cooper grew sullen and tried to catch Venka's glance.

"Well, where's your can?" the chairman remembered and, feeling the air with his fingers, opened his palm in front of him, requesting Venka to show it to him quickly.

"Just a sec, Nikolai," Cooper started up, "he'll show you everything himself, our innovator."

Venka looked at them as if they were madmen.

"The trade union's interested in your idea," Cooper winked. "You know, about the cans with titanium paint not to be brought in from far-off Biisk, but to make them ourselves, at our own plant."

"If they're interested, they can come and see for themselves," said Venka with his eyes.

"Let's have it..."

Venka snickered, pulled his cap over his eyes, thrust his hands into his pockets, and waddled into the shop reluctantly. He was followed by Cooper and the chairman who felt uneasy in front of the women workers because they could not keep up with the broad steps of the quarrelsome fitter.

Five minutes later, having replaced some spare parts in a lathe and sent away a woman worker, Venka rolled up a dozen cans before the very eyes of his superiors.

"That's something," said the chairman, "They're just as good as the ones from Biisk. How much'll we save this way!" he looked at Cooper in excitement.

With a look of a birthday boy, poorly concealed by a worried expression, Cooper prepared to set forth his calculations, but Venka, who had heard them many times before, yawned loudly and dropped one of the cans to the floor as if by accident. It hopped about with a metal ring.

"It's not up to the mark, as one of my chums says."

"What do you mean?" the chairman looked worried, eying the can as it rolled along the concrete floor.

Cooper frowned and snorted heavily.

At that moment, Ivlev appeared at the shop door. He had dropped in at the very end of the shift, he was still in a canvas robe with a gas-mask bag flung over his shoulder. He could not have heard Venka's last words, but apparently realised it was a serious talk.

"So-o," Cooper drawled. "It's all clear now."

"What's clear?" Ivlev inquired impatiently.

"My boss has finally realised that there will be no end to complaints about these cans of ours," Venka was glad that Ivlev had come. "The upper cover has a clearing in this place," he drummed on the can with his fingernail, "where the side joint is. There was a slit here for the rolling-up. But it doesn't fit, because of our primitive equipment."

Ivlev took the can from Venka's hands and examined it from all sides for a long time, while the chairman and Cooper now waited for him to say something. But Ivlev was in no hurry. He lifted the can from the floor, carefully inspected it, and finally, looking and feeling the lathe, placed the can between two discs and rolled up first the top and then the bottom.

"He's right," he said with relief, fingering the bulge in the place where the joints met, "the paint is sure to leak through here."

"Why do you think so?" Cooper cried indignantly, snatching the can from Ivlev's hands.

"For the same old reason," Ivlev grinned, unperturbed, and Venka realised there was a grin on his face, too.

The trade union committee chairman looked emphatically at his watch.

"All right, we'll discuss the can later, on the job."

And he walked away along the shopfloor, with an expressly brisk step, knowing very well that the men followed him with their eyes. Venka noticed that Nikolai's shoulder-blades stuck out more than usual. Office work never made a person more handsome, that was certain.

"I should have told him about the engine," Venka recalled as an afterthought. "That would really get him."

"It's too bad," Cooper felt like showing his concern. "Venka, you received the cash for your innovation project. Why're you..."

But he was not really troubled, he was only pretending. Meantime he was closely watching Ivlev.

"Well Venka, you'll have to bring the idea to the end. So it's up to the mark, as our common friend likes to say. But you can do that later, of course," Cooper smiled and, feeling in his pockets, tossed Venka the keys from his car.

"Take them, I'll have to drop in at the manager's office."

He disappeared before Venka could size up the fact that the keys of his boss's car were in his hand and belonged, for some time at least, to him and no one else.

"You can go to the devil with your car!" he wanted to cry out to Cooper as he went away, but on the one hand, the man had walked out of the shop already and it was no use yelling and scaring the life out of the women workers who were not to blame, and on the other, he could clear up their relations at some future time—why did he have to do it today?

"Will you go for a drive with me?" Venka suggested merrily, throwing the keys up into the air and feeling their coolness with pleasure.

"Where to?"

"To the garage. We'll fill the tank and come back. Then we'll drive to the landing, that goes without saying."

There was something Ivlev did not like in all this.

"You know, actually I've got to go home," he frowned imagining how Venka would say: "As you like", and there would be nothing left for him to do except turn and leave. "All right, let's go! I want to see how you drive. They say you can handle a boat, but I still don't know how you drive."

Venka laughed and skipped out of the shop to drive the car standing at the manager's office up to the shop.

He had taken Maximych from the forest post right after Simagin's death. Zinaida was good to the old man, but Maximych felt lonely in their city flat, and he sat for days on a bench near the entrance. Later Venka got him a job on the plant landing. He also bought a transistor radio set for the old man and brought him a stray dog on a rope.

"Well I don't even feel like dying now!" said Maximych screwing up his eyes at the Irtysh River, silvery in the sun, which he could now watch for hours on end.

He waited for Venka every evening, but this time Maximych was perplexed when he saw Zinaida sitting on the grass at the very gates: she had never before come here so early, particularly without her husband. They must have quarrelled again. The old man went away into his booth without calling out to her, but at this point Venka drove up.

"Now do you see that?" he exclaimed in wonder driving the car from the road, straight at his wife. "Why're you here on a week day?" he stuck his head out of the window, softly pushing her with the bumper from where she was sitting. "You're missing your job again, I bet you've left the counter to your assistant again?"

"Why should I have left it? What's wrong with you?" Zinaida came to her senses; she had failed to notice the car due to the sun, in the warm rays of which she had dozed off taking in the sweet odour of the grass. "You never listen to what I have to say first? I lost the key today, I don't know how it could have fallen out of my bag. So I thought, how will I go home if Venka goes on a spree again

tonight. And if I didn't meet him at the boat landing after four, I wouldn't find him at all, he'd go on a trip on his motorboat, and probably overnight too."

Venka was dumbfounded by his wife's bold words, particularly in the presence of his friends. He caught the calm gibe on Ivlev's face in the rearview mirror—he was apparently silently mocking both of them as usual—Venka looked sideways at Cooper. That windbag could hardly keep from laughing out loud for the whole river to hear.

Producing some wire from under his seat Venka took a long piece, put it through a bunch of keys, tied it and threw it to his wife's feet.

"Hang them round your neck like a locket and carry them with you."

He put the car into rear, drove around Zinaida who did not budge, and did not even look back until he turned round the corner of the garage. But when Venka saw Zinaida again, calmly approaching the landing, his eyes narrowed.

"Why should you chase her away, let her bask in the sun," Maximych suggested in a low voice. "Do you need the space she takes up. Zinaida told me that it was very stuffy in her industrial goods shop. They should be payed more for the poor conditions they work in, like at our plant. it's true," the old man tittered and Venka gave in.

He and Cooper put on rigid rubberised greenish coats, which Venka had got Cooper into the habit of wearing, over their undershirts. Formerly, Cooper had worn a bright orange life belt. "Listen, chief, you should understand," Venka taught him, "this is not a costume party. Clothing should be inconspicuous and plain!"

"You've forgotten your cap," said Zinaida without opening her eyes.

Venka felt his head in disbelief.

"It's true," he was embarrassed. "How could I do without my cap? It's my good luck token," he told Ivlev with a laugh and walked to the car to fetch the cap. "It was my sister's present, I nearly lost it in the water recently. Do you remember, chief?" he looked mockingly at Cooper.

"Of course I do?" Cooper sighed.

"Was that when you hit a rock at night?" asked Maximych.

"Right. It was near Vorony cape. I was chasing a rascal I saw with a net and wanted to take a short cut. I don't know how I didn't tumble out of the boat. When I came to I felt there was nothing on my head. I almost died on the spot. You know how accustomed I've grown to that cap."

"I flew up on my barge," Cooper put in, "turned on the searchlight and saw him bending over one side and feeling the water with his hands. I thought he'd bumped someone off."

Cooper started down the river, recalling how many times this summer he had experienced fear because of Venka, then gave another deep sigh and walked to the boat.

"Well boys," Venka said looking sideways at his wife, "Are we going to take along an attractive dame. I can suggest one."

Zinaida's eyelids trembled, but she remained sitting on the grass, with her face to the sun and eyes closed.

"Take her along, why not?" said Maximych. "What's there to think about?"

"But I won't implore her for a long time, you know," Venka seemed to remind himself.

"You don't have to," said Zinaida changing her position and settling down more comfortably, as if she intended to stay there till the end of the world.

Cooper had already motored out on his boat, and now waited for them, turning it against the current with the engine working at low speed. Venka's rocked, grating his boots on the pebbles near the shore, and smiling very patiently. Suddenly he ran up to Zinaida, grasped her from behind her knees, and carried her to the boat unable to avoid her light slaps.

At that moment, Nikolai drove up in his car.

"Take a look," Maximych said amazed by Venka's unusual playfulness. "He's like a newly wed, and with his own wife, not with another woman!" The old man touched the trade-union chairman by the sleeve.

"She's a cuttie."

Venka seated Zinaida in the boat, pushed the boat into the water with a sharp grating noise, and cried to Ivlev:

"Jump in, Sanya! What're you waiting for?"

When the boat reached the place where the river current was fast, Venka cranked up the motor and put the boat straight against the current, feeling joyfully how the handle vibrated. This was the moment he liked most of all: it was enough to push a button and the boat would surge forward spraying him with cool water.

Waiting some more until the boat came near a sandbank, Venka put it into gear and slowly turned the handle. Boiling waves immediately appeared in back, his face felt an invisible spray and the boat began to slide weightlessly along the water surface.

Venka laughed, and cried out hoarsely above the roar of the motor:

"It's a great motor, hear how it sings, Sanya? I took mine back and returned the new one to Nikolai secretly, he can limp along on it himself now."

Venka turned at top speed. The boat cut its own wave sharply and headed for shore, as if it intended to fly up into the air. Several metres away from shore, when it seemed that it would run into the moorage, Venka turned the rudder, sharply falling to the side opposite to the shore. The front of the boat ploughed into the water, lifting the screw up into the air for an instant, the motor revving up, then the boat surged forward leaving a wide trace behind it.

"Look what he's doing!" Maximych was delighted. "He never made a performance like that before."

"Nikolai," Venka cried out making a second turn. "Let's race. I'm with my old motor and passengers, and you're alone with your new motor. How about it?"

The trade-union chairman looked around grunting, wanting to make sure whether anyone else except the smirking Maximych had overheard him and looked at Venka reproachfully. Venka raced about a bit more, and then headed downstream. Cooper also turned, cut through the waves and came out sliding on the foamy water.

"You're a busibody," said Zinaida without any anger, making herself comfortable under some tarpaulin.

"It happens to me sometimes," Venka admitted plainly. "It's because I get all worked up."

He winked at Ivlev who winked back and went silent for

a long time. Now only the roar of the motor pressed on their eardrums. In this roar, which seemed to submerge everything around them, the shores moved towards them and away again with unnatural slowness. Only the town and its chimneys continued to move along with them, but immediately after the pontoon bridge, where the river turned westward, it seemed to shift to the right, falling behind them, becoming smaller, and the further they went from it, the darker became the sky above them.

"How I'd like never to return to the city," Venka thought, knowing that he would not adhere to this idea for long, that he could no more live without the city than without this river with its mysterious depth and eternity, without these banks, each place on which was so different.

He liked these instants when he drove along thoughtlessly, from the corner of his eye noting the buoys, boats and vessels he passed, and examining the distant shores where lived people he didn't know. The shore smelled of hay and stubble, or of a nearby site of a fire, motorcycles drove somewhere in clouds of dust; dark figures of anglers hovered with great patience in the side channels, where the sedge grew thick and green on the hillocks, and a herd of cows stood listlessly in the water, by some curly willow shrubs, trying to hide from the gadflies. By evening, the orange and pink reflections of the sunset descended on the calm, shining surface of the water, and the waves behind the boat grew higher and turned white.

At some point, Venka suddenly wanted to go ashore, put up the tent and make a fire with dry driftwood. The flaming splashes would extend to the middle of the river and further, and the bitter country odour of the campfire would fill the cool air, smelling of moist grass.

"How is it?" asked Venka, bending down to Zinaida and looking into her face. Without waiting for an answer, he smiled blissfully and began to sing in a low voice, as if to himself, about cell number eight. All of a sudden, he heard both Ivlev and Zinaida joining in.

The words did not go further than the boat, they were carried away by the roaring of the motor, but Cooper, whose boat was some distance away, some way guessed they were singing and caught up with them also intending to join in.

Unfortunately, he did not know the words and fell silent eyeing Venka in embarrassment.

Venka disassembled the disk clamps for rolling cans and threw them away before Cooper was due to go on leave.

Tests showed that the can leaked through the side joint, but Venka refused to make the necessary improvement in his invention.

"You know what," he told Cooper, "I've lost myself with you. Barrels and cans all round, makes me feel like a shop-keeper. This work is worse for my hands than doing nothing at all."

Cooper was not perturbed: he had seen a great deal in his time.

"What'll we do with your innovation, Venya?" he asked in an ingratiating tone.

"Mine? It's not mine at all, it's yours. You arranged for it to be registered, not I. You're fussing about with that can in the trade union, like it's God knows what."

Cooper turned around to see whether the women could hear them.

"But you got the money, not I."

Venka opened his eyes wide. They had spent that damned money together in the Irtysh restaurant!

"Well, if that's the way it is, they can deduce the sum from my wage. Then I'll have a clean conscience at least."

"No you won't", said Cooper closing his eyes and shaking his head sorrowfully. "Your worker's conscience won't be clean, Venya, even if you pay. Production is the most important thing. The plant badly needs those cans. There's very little left to be done. And you don't want to move a finger."

"That's right, I don't."

"Well then," Cooper sighed, "that's how it'll be."

He had grown tired of Venka's tricks. Either he didn't permit him to drink, even if they went up and down the river for two days without sleep or rest. Or he would refuse to give him any of the confiscated fish, even to make some soup, despite the fact that it was terribly hot and the fish would spoil before they got to the fishery inspection.

And then there was the outboard motor: Venka had a habit of making his chief putter about with the motor, so he would learn how to fix it. No, he was not the companion he had hoped for when he invited him to his shop.

"I'll have to find a replacement for him", decided Cooper. "A sacred place never remains empty!"

On the same day, he brought a new fitter to the fifth shop. Venka looked at him and was dumbfounded: it was Torpedoboot, standing in front of him and smiling affably.

"That's too much," Venka's cheeks twitched nervously. "What's the joke, Bob?"

"Here I decide, not you," Cooper dropped. "He's as good a fitter as you. He's from the first shop too, by the way. Do you think you're the only one who's sick of smelling gas? Why, they'd all take off, all your repairmen, with that Ivlev at their head, if they'd only find a job with good pay."

"Don't touch Ivlev, you're no match for him!"

"Yes, of course! You're birds of a feather. You fly about, making metal with wings to it. There'd be no plant without you."

And Torpedoboot stood there smiling and baring his teeth as if nothing had happened. For a second, Venka thought he was seeing things.

"No, I won't let things come to that!" Venka grated his teeth.

This was the replacement he would not stand for, though it should have been all the same for him. But the very thought that room number eight with the neatly arranged tools would now belong to the person, whom he had tracked all summer, provoked his rage.

"Let's have it this way," Venka called Cooper aside. "When're you going on leave? Next week? Well, go ahead. You'll go to the south, to Sochi, won't you? Right, have a good rest, restore your strength. Meanwhile I'll finish off the cans. What can I do? The job has to be finished. Me, you can trust."

He did not really know what would happen with him not only in a month, but even in a day. But Cooper suddenly thought that Venka had buckled under, that he would forget his arrogance, and would eat from his hand now. Every man has his place.

"Jolly well, I agree," he said with coarse condescension and patted Venka on the back with one hand, while embracing Torpedoboot with the other, as he led him out of the shop.

Venka winced, but said nothing, mustering patience.

There had been no storms on the Irtysh River for a long time, and this one was very fierce. The river moaned, and all living things had hidden.

It seemed that no one existed in the whole wide world except for the two of them. One was in a motorboat, the other was rowing. Venka immediately recognised that the rower was Torpedoboot. He was on a light, bluish boat, the colour of the water. Venka pressed the handle of the motor, leaning against the hot case of the motor, as if urging his boat to go faster, but was unable to catch up with the blue boat.

An invisible force seemed to be holding him back. The wind stung his face painfully and whipped against his chest, his face was wet, but he had to go on by all means. When he had exhausted all his strength, everything suddenly changed. The storm died down. A primeval silence set in, and he could hear the reeds moan plaintively.

The sound made Venka feel eerie. But there was no turning back now. The tall weeds behind him were not greenish and straw-coloured, but emerald from the snow on the leaves, and a side channel mysteriously opened up ahead. It must have been here that Torpedoboot had been hiding before he drove out on his boat to Simagin.

Venka now had an oar in his hands, and moved slowly through the channel. The silty bottom was churned up and let out bubbles, which burst at the boat's sides with a gurgling sound.

All of a sudden, Venka saw Torpedoboot backing away from the reeds to the shore, dragging his blue boat along.

Whether Venka had been waiting for this moment or not, his heart fell, and he was aware of a pain in his chest. The pain was stronger than in those nights when he had dreams about emergencies on the shopfloor. Venka was siezed with

a fear, which made him want to scream. But he only opened his mouth convulsively and looked numbly at Torpedoboat, who rose in front of him like a ghost. He was enormous and dark and looked at him grinning and flashing his false teeth.

"Well, chum, so you've tracked me down finally?"

"Yes, I have," said Venka and thought to himself, "I shouldn't have hurried. I should've let Torpedoboat take out the nets and seines first, before he saw me. Then, turning on the motor abruptly, I would've driven out of the reeds, when his boat was packed with fish."

Torpedoboat laughed as if he had read Venka's thoughts. The beastly laughter rang out over the channel, reached the cape where the monument to Tolya Simagin stood, and hit the dimly twinkling star.

"I'll kill you . . . because you figure it out one way and it works out another," Venka wanted to say, but at that moment Torpedoboat grasped an oar which was as big as himself. He hit Venka with a smashing blow, and everything went dark in his eyes. He heard Zinaida's voice from far off, reaching his mind weakly:

"Venka! Can't you hear me? God almighty, what's wrong!"

Still, he recognised the voice. They had lived so many years together, and she was always there, pestering him. That voice had an irritating effect on him. The worst thing was that she was unable to restrain herself even here. What a habit she had. Here he was dying, and she didn't even care, repeating the same thing over and over again: "Can you hear me, Venka?!" Of course, he heard her and kept wondering: "What is she doing here, of all places?"

Finally, he saw her. Zinaida was seated on the bed in a nightgown, crying and slapping him on the face:

"Wake up, you monster! God almighty, what a life! I can't go to sleep in the evening waiting for you to return from your moorage, and you scream as if you're crazy in the night, waking me!"

"Who, me?" Venka parted his clenched teeth.

"No, I!"

"So what, I have to put up with your snoring."

"Keep still, you!"

Zinaida pulled the blanket over her head and fell on the pillow. Venka felt that she was trembling with her whole body; first he wrinkled his face sorrowfully, then with a sigh, began to blame himself for not remaining silent. It would have cost him less, it was no use convincing her now that he did not scream on purpose.

He worked on the disks all week, until the rollers finally began to function as they should. Sometimes he even had to work in the evenings, coming home after midnight.

On Friday, when he was getting ready to leave for work, he saw a suitcase in the hall. He was about to go out of the door quietly and run off for the bus, when he suddenly wondered what it was doing there. He recalled that it had been there the day before and the day before that.

Venka tugged at the lock, and inside were Zinaida's meagre belongings. He woke her right away, and saw that she hadn't been sleeping at all, her eyes were red and her eyelids swollen with crying.

"What're you up to, eh?" he felt a lump in his throat.

"It's only now you've noticed..."

Venka crumpled his cap, winked quickly, and did not know what to do or what to say.

"That's something," he tried to smile and sat down on the bed without brushing away the sheet. On another occasion, Zinaida would have scolded him for that—don't ever sit on the bed in your street clothes—but this time she remained silent, as if everything was as it should be. This troubled him even more:

"Zina, what's wrong?"

Venka touched her shoulder and felt her soft warm body under his hand. A small vessel pulsated helplessly under her shoulderblade. Once, he had liked to kiss her there, in the space directly above her shoulderblade, and Zinaida always shivered but did not push him away, though she was very ticklish. My God, it was such a long time ago, as if it had never been at all, as if it were a distant mirage. Why was life like that, everything passed away and gradually disappeared.

He looked at Zinaida and was overcome by pity for her. He should bend down over her and kiss her as he did before. If he said only one word to her—a good word, not like

the ones he usually said—she would mellow, first she would cry both bitterly and happily, touching him even more, then her eyes would lighten and her lips would become rosy, though they would be salty from tears. Her nagging, after which she would calm down completely, would be the final cleansing.

Of course, she would exaggerate things, it was always that way—she would say he didn't love her, or need her, and so on—but he must bear it all patiently and convince her that it was all not so. That was the only way. She had suffered so much in these years because of him and his foolish character! He should fall to her feet for the simple reason that she had not come to hate him, and had not damned him and run off, as any other woman would have done a long time ago.

"But she's also going away somewhere!" he remembered the suitcase in the hall again and went numb at the thought. The fingers that were caressing her shoulder became like wood. That second decided everything.

Zinaida threw off his hand.

Venka was distressed.

"Leave me alone," she only said and screwed up her eyes hard.

He was afraid to touch her at that moment, his hands lay listlessly on his knees. He stood up and went outside quietly. He walked without hearing his own steps.

"I must talk to her in the evening," Venka said to himself in the bus. "No, I'll drop in at her work during lunch-break." He hadn't been in her shop for a long time: either they were quarrelling or else he was busy. But now he had nothing important to do. They would linger around the lathes with Cooper and gossip.

During the day he forgot the morning scene, and in the evening he found a note on the table: Zinaida wrote that she was tired of living with him and was going away to her mother and son.

"She must have gone on leave," he tried to reassure himself. "Why not? She couldn't have left for good, after all. It was high time for her to visit her son..."

Venka did not sleep all night, tossing and turning in his bed. By morning his anxiety somewhat dissolved, he

began to think about everything more casually. Without seriously blaming himself for anything, he left for the river early in the morning. Only on Monday when he dropped in at her shop, Venka learned that Zinaida had left her job and gone away for good.

Her assistant, who was now alone behind the counter, eyed him with obvious disapproval.

In two days he fulfilled all the formalities and was ready to leave for good; it was as if not a trace of him now remained here.

Before leaving he decided to drop in at the chlorinator shop. He had not been there since he had left Ivlev's team. How much time had gone by? Venka wondered.

Venka knew that he should say goodbye to the men: who knows whether he would ever see them again. But he could not bring himself to tell them he had quit work. It would seem to them so unlikely that they would only laugh at first. Someone would joke that it was Torpedo-boat who had forced him out. They would rather believe, if he said he was returning back to the first shop. So it was better not to torment himself needlessly.

Afraid to meet someone he knew, Venka entered the shop not from the locker rooms, but through the covered passage. Formerly he had frequently walked this way, though the passage, which was cool even in summer, was really intended for transport.

As soon as he had entered the passage gates after the sunshine outdoors he was enveloped in darkness. Venka instinctively surged forward towards the dull droning sound coming from the depth of the shop, which was hidden by a turn in the passage. He felt driven to the place where the chlorinators were floating in the bluish smoke. It could be an accident! The men might be working hard, their canvas overalls burning their chests, heated by the infernal sheet-steel cylinder. How they needed such hands as Venka's now!

He had gradually broken into a trot. His face showed pain, as if he were to blame for the troubles of the fitters from Ivlev's team. All the bitterness that had accumulated

in Venka's heart that summer, and in particular in recent days, now found an outlet. He wanted to cry, as he had in childhood, when he suffered from what seemed to him an unbearable insult.

"Where're you running to, Komrakov?" someone's voice stopped him.

Venka halted with a start. He had almost knocked into the trade-union chairman at the very entrance into the shop.

Contrary to habit, Nikolai Sanych did not examine him and inquire what was wrong with him and why he looked so upset, but smiled broadly, threw his arms apart as if to embrace him, and patted him lightly on the back.

"Good to see you, Venka, it's been a long time."

"Too bad we had to meet at all," thought Venka eyeing the shop.

"Have you decided to return to your own place?"

"And what about you, do you intend to return?"

The chairman looked at Venka attentively, trying to understand whether he was joking, and then peered somewhere into the dark depth of the shop.

"To tell the truth," he coughed huskily, and Venka suddenly wanted to believe him like never before, "I'd go back this very day to my old tool shop. I really miss it! Sometimes I marvel myself at how I miss it. My hands itch in my sleep, as if from sweat-soaked mittens we wore when we worked like mad near the sheet-steel drum. Can you imagine that?" he marvelled joyfully.

"If you see it in your dreams," Venka lowered his eyes, "then of course..."

"He's not such a bad guy after all," Venka thought. "But doesn't he know that I've left? Or maybe he doesn't believe it?"

Without saying another word, Venka walked up onto the gallery and walked past the heated sheet-steel drums, studied the whole shop from above, and turning to go back, decided to stop for a minute at the far wing of the gallery. Last time he had been there that spring day, when he was looking for Ivlev. He had been angry with Sanya then, and hadn't noticed much. Now, before leaving, he could at least have a look.

The lightest and most clean place in the shop had been selected for the control board behind the last, sixth chlorator. The control consoles were placed in a row around the spacious and high-ceilinged room, and the whole upper part was covered by colour schemes of technological lines, like the cupola of a circus.

"Looks damned good," Venka threw back his head, his mouth half-open, trying to solve the mystery of the relations between the lamps of the consoles, on the one hand, and all the mechanisms of the enormous shop, on the other.

Standing there, with his neck craned, from the corner of his eye he suddenly noticed Sanya Ivlev. Sanya was lingering right next to him. When had he come up?

Coughing dryly Venka removed his cap, wiped his perspiring forehead with the back of his hand, and said as if to himself:

"So if something happens, say, on the tetrachloride line, a lamp will light up here, right?"

Ivlev remained silent, smiling sadly. Venka mused for a while closely examining the console. Then seeing his mistake, he said:

"No, the important thing here is to eliminate the defect automatically. Without human interference. Then it'll be up to the mark, Sanya."

He continued without any preliminaries:

"Where've you been all this time. I haven't seen you for ages."

"No, it's you I haven't seen since very long. When are you leaving?"

"Tomorrow."

"Where to?"

"Where? To visit my mother-in-law."

"And after that?"

"I'll see. First I'll bring back Zinaida and my son."

Ivlev hesitated, wondering whether he should tell Venka that today he had been appointed head of the first shop. Sighing, he gave Venka a firm, quick handshake, and hurried off about his business without turning back.

Venka followed Ivlev with his eyes, tumbled down the iron ramp with a clanging noise, and quickly walked out

of the shop along the same route, through the empty passage.

From the doors he eyed the multitude of pipes, drums and galleries, winked nervously, and turning abruptly headed for the turnstile.

The woman at the turnstile, who knew him, paid no attention to him, and Venka stopped.

"I don't have a pass now", he tapped his empty pockets.

The woman gave him a dull look.

"Hey, grannie, don't you hear me?"

"What do you want?" her stool squealed. "Run along now."

Venka was offended. He had grown accustomed to the woman during those years. But she didn't care a straw whether Venka was there or not. The only thing she would probably remember was his unusual cap.

Waiting for the bus, Venka remembered how he had wanted to buy a bouquet of flowers for Zinaida on this very spot. But he never did... The small shop with its worn walls and soiled door, now seemed so dear to him, that he wanted to cry. Before, he could stand here for weeks without looking in or hurry past.

In the bus he did not right away notice Raissa. She stood next by, glancing at him. On the curves the bus leaned to the side and their faces moved further apart, and then together again.

"It's strange, however," said Raissa, as if to herself, but without taking her eyes off him.

"What's strange?" Venka seemed to wake.

"No, nothing..."

"Heard you're on a new job," he said. "No wonder you kept running to the top gallery all the time."

The tension in her eyes had faded away, and the familiar sparkle, which had once affected Venka, returned. Noticing his embarrassment, she laughed softly:

"I'm moving ahead! I even entered technical school."

"No kidding," Venka forced a smile. "When did you manage?"

"Just recently", she shrugged her shoulders. "I'm no worse than anyone else. What's said is good is done. Me, you can trust."

"Who says you're worse," Venka let out, growing red in the face. He was once again subject to her long, piercing glance. "You know, Raissa, I've decided to leave."

She remained silent, looking somewhere past his shoulder, remembering what a funny fellow he used to be. Venka Komrakov, with hardly any eyebrows and a fair head of hair. What had she found in him? She had thought she would never get over the time he turned her out of the house and remained with Zinaida. Then there was an even more shameful episode, when Raissa had been in his boat, while Venka walked along the river-bank persuading his wife to get into the boat too. Wasn't this a comic story!

He guessed what she was thinking about, squeezed her fingers and got off the bus two blocks before his house. He decided to take a walk. Who knows when he would come back here, to this street, which had grown up before his very eyes.

That night, Venka could not fall asleep for a long time.

He was haunted by a feeling that he had failed to do something, or not finished it, and it was very difficult for him to leave because of it.

By morning he remembered Maximych: he had forgotten to say goodbye to the old man. He was so upset, he got out of bed. He recalled how Maximych had looked at him the last time they saw each other, sensing that something was bound to happen.

Venka clenched his teeth. He felt like running to the moorage right away. It was quiet and empty there now. The boats had been dragged out of the water, turned over and placed in a row on wooden frames. From a distance they resembled fresh tombs covered with snow. Ice had appeared by the banks of the Irtysh, the water was locked in an ice frame, and snow flakes danced in the cold air.

There was something else that worried Venka. He realised that he had to say goodbye to Tolya Simagin, only when he dozed off for a short time in the morning. It seemed to him that he was racing along the waves in his boat and had reached the channel to look at the monument.

"Greetings, Tolya. It's me, Venka Komrakov. How does it feel to be lying here? You must miss the water... You haven't used the boat all summer. You can't lie here in peace, because you didn't avenge yourself. You must be seeing the rascal quite often, when he goes by, but you can't stop him. Don't worry, Tolya, he'll get it from us yet. I'll come back, Tolya. I'm sure to come back!"

The heart-rending echo rang over the water, and the star on the monument twinkled in response.

VALERY POVOLYAEV, born in 1940 in the town of Svobodny, Khabarovsk Region, comes from an army officer's family. After finishing school, he was electrician at a factory, attended a flying school, then entered the art department at the Moscow Textile Institute. Thereupon, he was designer at Zarya factory and demonstrated his works at exhibitions at home and abroad.

In 1969, Valery Povolyaev joined the correspondence school of scriptwriting at the USSR Cinema Institute, combining this with writing for *Literaturnaya Gazeta*. His journalistic work took him all over the country, and gave him the plot for his first short story, "The Life Story of a Friend", about workers at the Kursk magnetic anomaly. His second story, "A Day Like Any Other", was based on his impressions from a tour of collective farms in the Central Non-Black Soil Region of Russia. His first long story, *We Appear Before the Camera*, was published in 1972, quickly followed by *Oil on Fire*, *The Route* and *A Group*.

Valery Povolyaev's characters are oil workers, prospectors and people of various other trades. An essayist at the beginning of his career, the young prose-writer is very precise in describing his characters. Povolyaev's works are devoted to the time of the scientific and technological revolution, which brought about profound changes in the psychology of the working people.

Valery Povolyaev

OIL on FIRE

Ivan Kosykh woke up early—day was just beginning to break and the weak light barely forced its way through the window, coloring the room, with its three beds and electric stove, a watery gray. The house was cold. Kosykh had woken up from the heat and pulled the wires which fed the stove out of the socket...

"Just the right time for shooting woodgrouse," he thought, with a long moaning yawn, and then threw off the blanket with an effort. "It stopped snowing," he thought, surprised. "It'll warm up. It's already clearing. As long as it doesn't start raining. It often rains after it snows. Once it sets in it'll go on for a long time, and a helicopter won't come. But it shouldn't start raining, no it shouldn't. That means the Mi-8 will come and I'll hand the boys up some woodgrouse to bring to Nadka. So she'll know that her husband is taking care of her even in the taiga," thought Kosykh.

He got dressed, wrapped his feet in dry, cool foot-cloths, and checked to make sure they didn't rub anywhere. Then,

grabbing a small-bore rifle from the storeroom, he went out of the house.

It had cleared up. The new-born day drew the taiga apart and revealed a chopped-down glade with small huts, still unlit. There was also a solar oil storehouse on a mound at the edge of the "sand"—an airstrip as long and narrow as a road, and an old caterpillar landrover, its radiator resting against the knotty butt of a pine, which had been left by the seismologists who had lived here before the drillers... The landrover, with its angular shape, protective coloration, and large roller wheels, looked like a tank and in front of it, as though in front of a knocked-out tank, the darkened, rust-eaten caterpillar lay, pressed into the earth. Kosykh went around the house from the rear and dove under a tarpaulin awning, where the cold hulk of a ZIL-131 truck arose. Its dimly glittering headlights looked like fish eyes. There were three licensed drivers who drove the truck—the foreman Sazakov, the drill operator Zhimenko, and the diesel operator Kosykh. Sazakov and Zhimenko weren't at the drilling rig—they were supposed to fly in today—and therefore Kosykh was in charge of the truck. One vehicle was enough for the brigade, since there was nowhere to go anyway—they were surrounded by the taiga, swamps, birds, and animals; there were places where men wouldn't venture at all. It's true that there was a five-kilometer road laid by bulldozers, which was used when they moved the rig from the first well to begin testing in the Trom-Agansk area. The first well turned out to be empty and the second one seemed to be too... But those in charge believed that it had to be tested in practice by drilling. And who knows, oil may just start gushing.

"Go ahead and wait for it to gush," Kosykh smiled. "Money is just being thrown away."

He knew as a hunter that before winter woodgrouse and their mates come out on sandy roadsides to peck pieces of flint. In the winter they feed on pine needle which, as everyone knows, are tough, dry and prickly, about as digestible as wire, so the woodgrouse use the flint to wear down the needles in their stomach. If you kill a woodgrouse this time of year and open its belly, you will find

large, round, flat stones half the size of a sparrow's egg lying in its spread-out gizzard. But when you rip open the stomach of a woodgrouse killed in the springtime, thin, transparent water-like pellets glitter in place of the stones. That's all that's left...

The woodgrouse is trusting and sleepy before winter. It allows a man on foot to come within seventy meters and takes a truck for a forest animal, allowing it to come close and then flying up from under its wheels.

Kosykh didn't start the car at once—the motor, which had grown cold overnight, played tricks for about ten minutes before starting, and he had to run it idle for a few minutes to warm it up. While waiting, Kosykh extracted a sealed pack of cartridges from his pocket and opened it up—the backs of the percussion caps shone a dull black. After admiring the cartridges, he opened his “bloody mess”—the glove compartment in the dashboard—and put in the pack; he fitted the rifle next to him. Now he was all ready.

He pulled his cap over his eyes to limit his field of vision, so that he would concentrate on the road, and not let his gaze wander to the tree tops. Then he drove out from under the awning.

After crossing the helicopter field, the road descended to the Trom-Aganka—a narrow, unusually calm, fish-filled stream which broke away from the Yalma River ten kilometers from there and rejoined it in another twenty kilometers.

Beyond the turn Kosykh slowed down. The engine began to howl with the strain of being in low gear, demanding freedom and speed.

“Now, now, beastie,” Kosykh warned the truck soothingly.

The road first rolled under the radiator, then disappeared ribbon-like into the distance, cutting into the motionless wall of the cedar taiga. Kosykh carefully skirted two deep ruts filled with frozen water, and it occurred to him that it might turn out to be a bad hunting day—the wind was rising, and woodgrouse hide from the wind behind felled trees, where they can't be spotted or driven out... All indications were that woodgrouse wouldn't come out on

the road today. Should he get out of the truck and wander in the taiga for a while to put up the bird? . . . But who can shoot woodgrouse with a small caliber bullet, when it flies up frightened from under one's feet? You might as well fire at the empty sky! You need a gun and small shot for that.

Beyond a turn he noticed a black grouse darting away from a distant bald cedar like lightning and weaving in and out low among the tree trunks. The black grouse gave Kosykh confidence—it showed that there was game!

At the abandoned drilling site he turned around, skirted a hill of waste-iron rubbish, and, taxiing onto the road, barely made out a gray female woodgrouse about fifty meters away, as it jumped out into a fresh rut and began to dig resolutely in the sand with its beak.

"Is it crazy, or what?" muttered Kosykh, perplexed.

He drove as slowly as possible, the truck barely crawling, stealing up to the bird. The woodgrouse, calm, trusting, businesslike, paid no attention to her approaching death. When the bird was about seven meters away, Kosykh pulled the brake handle. The woodgrouse turned its head in surprise and again began pecking pebbles out of the rut in the snow, as though the truck weren't there.

"Now I'll give it to you," said Kosykh, driving the cart-ridge into the breech ring. "Now we'll open accounts."

He opened the cab door and rested the gun barrel on the edge of the half-open window. Knowing the woodgrouse wouldn't fly away—she couldn't spot a man sitting in a truck—he took long, careful aim, groping for the base of the neck with the foresight. Then he pressed the trigger smoothly and, before hearing the shot, saw the woodgrouse leap up and drop to the ground with a heavy thud, flapping its wings in the rut, loosening the sand and scattering snow in all directions.

"One to nothing," said the pleased Kosykh, flipping the smoking and warm cartridge case out on his palm.

He approached the woodgrouse, which had already stopped writhing, lifted it from the ground, and, with somewhat belated surprise, noticed that the bird's right wing, which couldn't be seen from where he had been, appeared to be marked, smeared with something skewbald,

of a rare emerald shade—it looked like some liquid—ink, perhaps?.. But no, it was a natural color. Kosykh tried to remember something to do with a marked woodgrouse, but nothing came to mind and, picking up the bird, he walked towards the truck. After tossing the woodgrouse into the load carrier, he sat at the wheel and turned the ignition key.

“That’s for you, Nadezhda, for ragout. Woodgrouse ragout, huh? Now you’ll be one up on the neighbors.”

He stretched, yawned, then got into gear and gave the order:

“Well, beastie, let’s raise some more dust. So far it’s one to nothing, and we ought to make it two...”

When he was already right by the “sand”, the engine unexpectedly began to stall and died down. Kosykh swore, but there was nothing to be done—he had to crawl out of the warm cab. He climbed onto the bumper, opened the hood, and immediately saw what was wrong—two spark plug caps had fallen off at the same time. Kosykh adjusted them and checked that they weren’t falling down. The caps were loose—he should wind wire around the heads, but he had nothing suitable on hand. He had to postpone the operation until he reached the village...

Having slammed the hood shut, he jumped to the ground, and only now was he struck by the frozen, death-like silence surrounding him. Even the pines, bowing in the wind, bent noiselessly, without the usual groaning and crackling. He stepped to the edge of the road and slipped on the reindeer moss. There was plenty of this moss—fodder for deer—in the taiga—papery white, porous, similar to a synthetic sponge. It was dry and brittly hard on top and moist below—collected water with its roots; it was as slippery as cow dung covered with a thin crust.

His eyes fell on an ideally round glade full of overripe, snow-warmed blueberries; their leaves, looking like flying drops, were red—so red that they even hurt one’s eyes against the pure snow. Kosykh bent down, pinched off some berries, and ate them—they proved to be sickly sweet, making his saliva thick and viscous, as preserves do, and he saw when he spat that it was the color of tar.

Not far off the blueness of ripe crowberries beckoned; these berries are sweet when you take them in your mouth, but sharply bitter when you crush them against your tongue. A crowberry shrub caught on Kosykh's boot, and the blue berries hit the snow.

Driving the truck under the awning, he locked the "bloody mess", where he left the cartridges, took the rifle with him, and went into the house. The assistant driller Polikashin was already splashing away at the sink.

"Want to go for breakfast?" Kosykh shouted out cheerfully from the door; his mood had become lighthearted, almost buoyant, as if he had drunk champagne.

"He's not drunk, but he's definitely in a good mood," Polikashin decided.

"M-m-ooohoo," he lowed.

"Do you know if a lot of drilling's got done during the night?" Kosykh asked.

Polikashin, a thin middle-aged man, rinsed his mouth and straightened up. Water shone on his shaggy brows, and his cheeks looked blue after shaving.

"Your voice is ringing out like a schoolboy's for some reason."

"There's a good reason. Did they do a lot?"

"Not much. If they're going to drill their way to America they've still got a long way to go. They had to lift the instrument and change a worn bit... So just figure that the whole shift was lost on the bit."

"Don't take it so hard, Polikashin. The main thing is not to funk out—we'll get through. I winged a woodgrouse for my woman to make ragout," Kosykh bragged carelessly, "let her give the neighbors a little surprise."

"Look here," Polikashin suddenly uttered maliciously, "stalking a defenseless bird armed to the teeth! And in a truck... You should go out with a bow and arrow as they did in the old days and then I'd like to see you get woodgrouse for ragout."

"What's the matter, get up on the wrong side of the bed?" Kosykh asked in surprise. "Everybody shoots, so I also gave it a try."

"Yes, on the wrong side," Polikashin muttered. He approached the bench where the dead woodgrouse lay, its

wing dangling. Polikashin lifted it by the wing and held it suspended, as if considering something. "Do you know at least who you did in?" He lowered the woodgrouse onto the bench and carefully placed the marked wing under the bird's carcass. "You shot Katka."

Now Kosykh's mind seemed to clear—this is what he tried to recall while standing in the middle of the road. Katka was a tame woodgrouse, although, strictly speaking, she was only comparatively tame...

In the spring, when they were still drilling at the old site, three workers set out with wicker baskets for the bank of the Trom-Aganka, where birches and aspen grew together with the fir, cedar, and pine; the first spring mushrooms really like damp places with a mixture of trees. On their way to the stream they stumbled across a woodgrouse nest on the ground under a pussy willow shrub. A handsome bearded male sat on the nest—he had evidently just replaced the female and hadn't had a chance to straighten out his plumage after flight. When he saw the people approaching, the woodgrouse anxiously turned his head from side to side, but didn't fly off—he was afraid to expose the nest to the cold. One of the mushroom hunters managed to cover the woodgrouse and the nest with his wicker basket. The bird didn't even stir under the basket, and when they lifted it, they saw that his head was bowed lifelessly on his magnificent breast—the bird was dead. They took it from the nest to examine it, and a drop of blood fell from his beak into someone's open palm—the woodgrouse was felled by a blow which strikes people as well—a heart rupture. And the nest was full of gray-brown eggs.

The drillers stood by the nest, stunned, until the female, grown thin from sitting on the eggs, bolted down from the nearest pine; unafraid of the people, she hobbled up to the nest and settled on it as usual. Seeing this, the men backed away from the woodgrouse nest, not one of them raising a hand against the bird.

Later they came specially to feed the woodgrouse, recognizing her among the hundreds of other females of her species which filled the taiga by the strange black-emerald spot on her right wing. Aunt Olya the cook named her

Katka. She called all tame creatures Katka, whether the sponging dog or the thieving tomcat or the kindly tame goat—for her they were all Katka. The name stuck. Later they moved to the new site, while the woodgrouse with her brood of nestlings stayed at the old place. And now she was felled by a bullet...

Kosykh felt he was at fault, but he wouldn't admit it for anything. He had to cut that old telltale Polikashin short, or else he wouldn't leave him along—he would devour him bones and all without lifting an eyebrow.

"If I hadn't done her in somebody else would have," Kosykh said roughly, "she would have come under fire as sure as day. And then I didn't see her, the idiot—she came out with her left side facing me..."

Polikashin pulled his cap down on his head with one stroke and went out without saying a word. Kosykh followed him. On the way he looked at the clock—there was an hour and forty minutes until the shift, just enough time to eat breakfast and curl up for a nap. He stopped in the passageway, and it occurred to him that, as it turned out, the woodgrouse was common property; everybody fed it and everybody had the right to taste the common meat.

"I'm an eager beaver, but I'm not greedy. We need a common bird like a nose needs a third nostril, if you'll excuse the expression..."

He gathered firewood in the passageway and, returning, stacked it by the armful near the stove. Then, finding an empty condensed milk can under the bench, he scooped up some solar oil. Without gasoline or solar oil the frozen firewood wouldn't catch fire, but gasoline is dangerous, it can blow up a stove and burn a man; solar oil is just the thing.

Ashes had accumulated on the cast-iron fire-bars; Kosykh didn't feel like clearing them away, and so he shifted the pile of dust to the side with a log, piled finely chopped birch slabs on the fire-bars, put several split resinous pine blocks on top, and poured on the solar oil. When he threw a lit match into its stuffed interior, the stove began to shake with a deep rumble, and the hut became cozy and peaceful from the homey sound. There was a light, spicy smell of smoke.

"I'll even clean the bird for you so you won't grumble." Kosykh spread a newspaper on the floor and began plucking the woodgrouse. It was hard to pluck, since it was clothed in long, luxuriant feathers for the winter. Kosykh, his fingers soon tired, grew angry.

"You'll gobble it down, you won't choke on it," he said, his voice growing hoarse as he tore out feathers and down by the handful and laid bare the woodgrouse's bluish, rippled skin. "And you'll even say thank you..."

The bullet holes—the entry hole above the wing and the exit hole on the back which was large enough to put your finger through—did not yet have time to form a scab.

Without plucking the stubble—the noticeable black sheaths from which the woodgrouse's new feathers should grow—Kosykh pulled on a glove and, taking the woodgrouse by the claws, shoved it in the fire. It smelled of burnt hair. Having singed the bird, he pulled off the skin in a single spurt and, while it was still smoking from the heat, he carried it to the dining room, staining the snowy path with an ichorous trail.

"Here's dinner for the brigade," he said while going into the entrance room, and threw the woodgrouse on a step with a thud.

Fat, good-natured Aunt Olya wiped the sweat from her moustached upper lip.

"You can make a thin gruel," Kosykh was no longer looking at the cook, but through the door curtain towards the dining room, where the men were sitting at a plank table. "Wood turkey broth—the men will be overjoyed..."

Almost the whole shift was sitting in the dining-room—the gloomy Polikashin, his face grown thin within a few minutes. In the autumn he suffered from an ulcer and was never without his analgesic and bicarbonate of soda—he was evidently feeling pain now. The two K's—Keda and Kolyshev—as inseparable as Mutt and Jeff, were also there, as well as the derrick operator Vitka Yuriev, a new arrival who had just finished school and was as surprised as a pupil by everything. Everything was new to him... Those at the table didn't pay any attention to Kosykh; he wanted to heckle them, say that they were making so

much noise eating that they could even be heard at the drilling rig, but decided not to.

Usually new arrivals serve as scapegoats, and therefore every once in a while the conversation would "pick on" Vitka Yuriev.

"Sometimes we baptize the young," said Keda, a tall and thin fellow, the type who as children can't shake off such nicknames as "watch-tower", "telegraph pole", "walking milepost", and many others which make fun of their height.

"How do you baptize them?" Vitka asked. "Stick their feet in a font, or what?"

"Why no, we test them for their quick wits."

Everyone had noticed that Vitka blushed at the slightest thing, and a blush appeared now. Round-headed and lop-eared, his haircut, with its childish forelock, twenty years out of date, Vitka barely kept a smile off his lips, which begged comparison with a calf's lips—only his blinking eyes showed that he was offended. Since he was little, Vitka feared ridicule more than anything else in the world, even more than thunder and lightning; he quailed before a joker just as a little child before the chairman of the Pioneer youth council.

Keda noticed Vitka's tension and waved his hand.

"All right, all right. I remember that when I worked as a kid as the senior assistant of the junior coal miner they put me in the middle of the drift and ordered me to prop up the ceiling with my back. They said hold it for a little while, we'll bring a prop right away. And so I held it for a full hour... Then the whole mine laughed themselves sick. A few even wrenched their jaws and were put on sick leave; I barely got out of having to pay for their time-off."

"You're laying it on thick," said Vitka.

"Sure I am," agreed Keda without laughing. "Here's a man of iron for you, everyone's howling with, laughter, and he couldn't care less, doesn't even smile."

"Did you really start out as a miner, not a driller?"

"Yes, as a miner... In the Donbass. I became a driller later. In Northern Ossetia. I married a mountain woman whose whole family was slaving away at oil. They got me into it as a relative."

"And how do they baptize oil workers?"

"Young ones?"

"Uh-huh."

"It's very easy to baptize ones who are still wet behind the ears. For example, someone started working with us . . . Kostya Gavrilov. He was a nice kid, but as trusting as a dove. On his very first day the diesel operator drives up to him with pipes, and says they should be marked with Roman numerals. And he orders him to use a heavier sledge hammer to make deeper marks."

"So what?"

"What do you mean, so what? The pipes would be driven into the ground anyway—they needed markings like a pike needs an umbrella, as our staff joker, Zhimenko, would say."

They fell silent. Only their spoons tapped against the bottom of the bowls.

"Where is this Gavrilov now?"

"What do you mean where? He's an engineer."

The door slammed and a voice could be heard which, although hoarse with a cold, preserved a hint of mockery.

"Ah, here's Zhimenko," said Kolyshev. "Speak of the devil."

Zhimenko threw aside the gauze "portière" and came in first, followed by Kosykh, firmly clutching the woodgrouse.

"Did you ever see such a pitiful sight? There he is standing by the door . . . Looks like he's waiting for something."

"No he's not," Aunt Olya interrupted and then stopped short and pursed her moustached lips, the apron on her stomach fluttering with laughter. "Doo-doo-doo-doo,"—the cook's laughter was like shots from a rapid-fire regimental cannon. Those at the table also joined at once in the uproar, even Polikashin, who evidently had already subdued his pain—his normal color was returning and he smiled sadly.

Zhimenko scratched the back of his head, ruffled the thin hair on his crown, and then theatrically placed one foot to the side.

"Good citizens, who are you laughing at?"

He really did look funny: one cheek was shaven with

utmost care and was as smooth and well-groomed as a well-ironed fabric, while the other was covered with rough, bushy bristles—half of the driller's face might belong to a hardened criminal, while the other half—well... to a provincial marshal of the nobility. Vitka Yuriev choked out through his laughter:

"What a clown," and again burst out resoundingly and lightheartedly.

Keda even screwed up his eyes.

Polikashin asked.

"What's the matter with you? Are you getting ready for the black grouse? Do you figure a black grouse will die of laughter when he sees you half-scraped?"

"There are plenty of grouse hunters without me," said Zhimenko, nodding towards Kosykh. "They're real professionals who can pop off five birds with three cartridges. And without any laughter."

From his tone it was impossible to tell whether he approved of the diesel operator's hunting skill or was criticizing it.

"Lord Remington has failed again?"

Zhimenko made a sour face: "Yes, once again."

The previous year he had gone as a tourist to England and had brought back the world famous Remington, a high quality and totally reliable razor. Such a razor is a dream in the city. But on trips to the taiga it often failed, and now it had played its usual trick on the driller: the brushes had jammed somewhere and, until they were cleared, there was no way he could shave. There was nobody in the hut—everyone except the free shift was at the drilling site, and Zhimenko had to appear in this state in the dining room to cadge a razor off someone.

"Why don't you take this, Aunt Olya?" Kosykh, diverting attention from the driller, held the woodgrouse out to the cook and shook it impatiently. "I even singed it. Specially... On firewood."

"What do you mean, on firewood... And why does it stink of solar oil?"

"You have to kindle the wood with solar oil."

"I know you don't use snots. Some culinary expert you are."

In her kindness Aunt Olya was ready to mourn any bird or animal that was hunted down.

"At least my bunkmate hasn't been drumming it into her about Katka," thought Kosykh, stealing a glance at Polikashin, "or else what a fuss she'd be making now..."

"Cook it yourself!" snapped back Aunt Olya.

"Why, you..." Kosykh was about to lash out at her, but he held his tongue—he didn't have the nerve to curse in front of the others. He grabbed the woodgrouse by its bent claws.

"It's time you wrote *The Hunter's Sketches*," Aunt Olya said sarcastically.

"So I will," Kosykh slammed the door in response, causing the gauze door-curtain to rear.

He didn't return for breakfast.

"Aunt Olya," Vitka said, looking downcast, "he meant well..."

"He's a poacher—sure, he 'meant well'," said Polikashin. "There's a fine against it, and more besides... They'll give him what for."

"Well, I like Kosykh," Vitka declared and, glancing at Zhimenko, burst out in a thin laugh.

"We're very cheerful today, somehow. We've already fulfilled our weekly laughter quota. It's not a good sign."

"Time will tell." Keda, the first to get up from the table, glanced out of the dark window barred with insulation tape. "It's September outside, but this is already the third day that the white flies have been buzzing around."

Vitka Yuriev walked back to his hut along the softened path, dirty with heavy boot marks, and thought about the drilling brigade and those he was going to be working with. Maybe even for the rest of his life.

Zhimenko was the first on the shift. He fished a butt from behind his ear, stuck it in his chapped lips, and began critically eyeing the drilling site. He had a dissatisfied and sour look: he was displeased with one thing or another—here was a swivel in the mud, there a scaffold board was sticking out, in another place some rotten thing wasn't where it belonged. Vitka Yuriev couldn't believe that only an hour before this gloomy man could have laughed infectiously both at his own absurd appearance and at any

other nonsense. "Here's a fine how do you do!" he recalled the proverb. "The bosses make a soft bed, but it's hard to sleep in it..."

"Comrade Zhimenko, do you want to hear a joke?" Vitka asked.

"Go on, comrade Yuriev," Zhimenko let slip unwillingly, striking a match against the side of the box.

"Someone was harnessing a horse. And he was asked in a crafty voice: 'Someone, why are you harnessing the horse backside forward?' Someone's answer was just as crafty: 'But how do you know which way I'm going?'" Vitka was silent and turned his innocent lynx eyes towards Zhimenko's mouth, expecting him to burst out laughing. He didn't, but unexpectedly puffed fragrant smoke right in Vitka's face.

"When I was little that joke already had a beard this long," Zhimenko passed his palm over his stomach and said rapidly: "Do you know why Cain killed Abel? Huh? Because he told a stale joke. Let's get to work."

Vitka was embarrassed, and his face became covered with red blotches.

Keda and Kolyshev stopped alongside.

"And here are the two K's!" Zhimenko summed up, extinguishing his smoked-out fag with his boot heel.

"Why so down in the dumps? Head up," Keda clasped Vitka by the shoulders. "Ah, Zhimenko gave you a tongue lashing. It'll all come out right in the end. He does it for appearances. The psychological factor, so to speak. Life is too short to mind every bitter pill." He leaned towards Vitka's ear and whispered slyly. "They say the deposit we're drilling is empty... We drilled one well and it was empty, and now we're digging another hole which is also empty, most likely. But I smell oil. What if we strike it, huh?" He screwed up his eyes. "Let's say you find it... Then our grateful descendants will build you a monument. Can you imagine? There you are, standing on a marble pedestal, looking proud, with your paw in the breast of your work duds, like Napoleon. Huh?"

He screwed up his eyes.

The diesel operator Kosykh and the foreman Sazakov were the last to come trudging up to the shift. Trampling

down on the steps, Sazakov climbed up to the plank bridge. He was a close-mouthed and corpulent strong man with tiny, but very lively eyes, which looked odd in his immense, sunburned face. Only a month before he had been transferred to work as a drilling foreman from OGEA—the Oil and Gas Extracting Administration, where he had been more carefree and even had more money than oil geologists, who left for the taiga for a week or two, or even three and sat holed up in the sticks, without the movies or cafés or the city sidewalk . . . Sazakov silently lifted the dirty padded curtain and went into the diesel room where he listened to the powerful roar of the working diesels and stood for a moment by the joiner's bench. Kosykh was already machining some plastic part with a rasp—Sazakov determined that it was an ebonite knife handle, but didn't say anything, and went to the pit which held the clay solution. The solution was still warm and steamy—in addition to the shift, the helicopter had brought one-and-a-half tons of bentonite to the drilling site. Torn paper bags had been piled up right here, at the edge of the pit. Sazakov went down to the pit and, bending over, stirred the solution with his finger and rubbed it on his palm.

Clay solution is almost the most important thing in drilling wells. Drillers believe that having good clay is tantamount to a bonus.

"How long have they been pumping in fresh clay?" Sazakov asked, returning to the plank bridge.

"About fifteen minutes."

"What's the density?"

"One point two!"

"Let's drop it by a tenth."

"But what if there's oil?" Zhimenko asked unexpectedly. "What if oil should turn up?"

"Where from? Everybody knows there's not a whiff of oil here. The geologists are no fools—they've climbed all over the place."

"All the same, we shouldn't drill with a lightened solution."

"You're wrong," said Sazakov calmly, "the lighter the solution the higher the drilling velocity."

"All the same," Zhimenko put in.

"Let's try it nevertheless. I'll take your place, and you can stand for a while as the assistant driller, agreed?" Sazakov descended from the plank bridge and set out along the cedar thickets towards the moisture-darkened houses not far off to change his clothes. Zhimenko glanced after him with the familiar sour expression on his face. He accepted Sazakov's offer without enthusiasm.

"We're all such champions..."

"Don't chatter on, spare your nerves," Keda advised him. "You can work the shift as assistant driller, but they say you can't grow new nerves."

"All the same, I'm a champion like the foreman is Gina Lollobrigida."

"Well? Just paint your lips and put on false eyelashes..."

Zhimenko went up to the plank bridge railing and looked towards the huts—they all stood where they should, and lights were burning in a few of them. The only street was empty. From the taiga, hulking thickly beyond the "sand", several violet clouds with evenly clipped edges were crawling in, making the earth as dark as night.

Zhimenko thought that these bombers would begin to unload over their heads in about twenty minutes and plaster them with snow. A human figure appeared from behind the houses, coming towards the drilling rig. "He made a fast return," he thought fleetingly. Sazakov took broad strides along the path, tapping the top of his tarpaulin boots with a branch. At one time, before going to the technical college, he worked as a drillers' assistant in Bashkiria, but an awful lot of time passed since then... He's probably already lost his touch...

Climbing up on the plank bridge, he ordered them to pump one and one density solution into the well.

Kosykh came out and struck his fist against his chest.

"What air, huh? You can cut it with a knife and spread it on bread. Foreman, I need new mittens!" he requested.

"I won't give you any," Sazakov answered calmly and chewed his lips.

If he's chewing it means he's displeased.

"Don't be tight-fisted. It's not from your own pocket."

"What do you mean, tight-fisted? It's state property, I have to answer for it with my own head. Not you, but me... A pair of mittens is about a rouble twenty! That's what. And what happened to your mittens? Did you lose them?"

Kosykh, not answering, waved his hand: there was no use asking.

"You gave the rouble twenty to a pig in a poke?" Sazakov once again began chewing noiselessly.

"I lost them," Kosykh muttered unwillingly. "While I was hunting."

"That's why you won't get new mittens."

Soon a snow squal descended on the taiga—large damp flakes crawled inside collars and unpleasantly stung their bodies, got into ears, pockets, mittens... The compressor saved them—when they turned it on little by little the warm air drove the dancing flakes from the site and cleared off the ice crust. But this was only down below—on the derrick, where the operator Vitka Yuriev was sitting, the situation was still unbelievable; his figure, faintly lit by electricity, was helplessly scurrying about amidst the immense snowflakes.

Keda put his hand to his mouth and called Vitka, but Yuriev didn't hear him because of the diesel rumble. Then Keda, pointing to Vitka, asked Sazakov, "Maybe we should replace him?"

"I don't know," Sazakov shook his head. "If it were me, I'd tell anyone who offered to help out of pity to go to hell. If the weather's clear—all right, but when things get hard—do me a favor—stay away!"

"What, are we toughening him to be a future polar explorer?"

"All right. If the snow doesn't stop in twenty minutes you take his place. Or else the boy might really get blown away," Zhimenko said ironically.

"What's wrong, did you eat too much 'max'?" Keda clapped one mitten against the other. "He'll freeze! He's wearing just a canvas jacket and a sweater, that's all... I saw it myself. He didn't even put a padded jacket on underneath, he wasn't issued one."

The bags under Zhimenko's eyes puffed up.

In these regions "max" was the name given to frozen turbot liver. The liver of the Ob River turbot is fatty and weighs up to two kilograms. The recruited Zhimenko appeared in town right before the anniversary of the October Revolution and, since he was assigned to work on the oil prospecting expedition, the drillers invited him to their holiday meal. They drank a lot, ate a lot, danced, and fooled around, and when they sat again at the table, Kolyshhev's wife passed around thin yellow pieces of raw, frozen sterlet, which melted in the mouth, and highly salted "max". Zhimenko, to whom the liver was a novelty, overdid it at the feast, and ever since could not only not eat turbot liver, but turbot itself.

Soon Vitka Yuriev, mechanically pulling his jacket over his head, his teeth chattering, came tumbling down from the snowy hell above. He really wasn't wearing a padded jacket.

"What a hero... He put a jacket on over his sweater," Zhimenko swore. Vitka, casting him a sidelong glance, wanted to say something in his defense, but was afraid he couldn't pronounce the words because of the cold. He jumped on one foot and waited for the diesels to let out a roar, so that his voice could hardly be heard.

"I'm a 'walrus', comrade Zhimenko. I swim in the Ob in the winter."

"If you're a 'walrus', I'm the Pope," Sazakov raged. "Hurry home and get dressed!"

If Vitka didn't obey it would certainly be bad for him. He tumbled down from the plank bridge.

Keda yelled after him to take his spare padded jacket, which was drying on the stove, but Vitka didn't hear; he was hidden in a whirlwind of snow.

During the second hour of work the speed of sinking the well suddenly fell—the auger gnawed impotently at the rock and the diesels made a resounding din when they were throttled, but it didn't help—the rock wouldn't yield...

Sazakov bit his lips, wondering what the matter was. On the whole everything was clear—one of the burrs—the pinheads fastened in the base of the bit—had broken off. There was one solution—lifting the instrument and changing the bit, but Sazakov delayed, hoping it would work

out somehow. If not, they would have to drag almost a kilometer of pipes, unscrew them, replace the bit with a new one, and blow a minimum of one and a half shifts...

"Well, are we going to lift the instrument?"

"Why you know, I think..."

The foreman was as stubborn as a mule.

"And what if we increase the speed? Maybe the bed's too much for us. Then the auger can't get through, right?"

"It won't get us anywhere. The diesels will only eat up lots of fuel. And that's the end of it."

"There's no harm in trying. Raise the velocity."

When the diesels raised their roar, Kosykh jumped out onto the site from behind the curtain and, pushing his cap aside, twirled his finger by his temple—what's the matter with you, have you gone off your rocker? But seeing Sazakov's tense figure and the deep flush on his neck, he waved bitterly and retired to the diesel room. The arrow indicating the load on the bit crawled to the right. But without any result.

"Getting no for an answer is no crime," said Sazakov in a conciliatory tone. "If I had gotten into an argument I would have lost."

Zhimenko shielded himself from the light with his mitten:

"They say that when two people argue, one, excuse me, is a fool and the other is dishonest. Dishonest because he knows he's right and is going to win, a fool because he doesn't know, but still gets into an argument. And then people argue who know either too much or too little."

Sazakov burst out laughing and made a sign to the derrick platform, where Keda, who had replaced Vitka Yuriev, was standing. Keda crossed his hands over his head, showing that he was ready.

The snow began to let up and the wind seemed to be dying down. Zhimenko raised his head. How did Keda feel up there, on the derrick platform?

"Don't look at me! Watch the wrench!"

That was Sazakov.

The wrench pulled the stand out of the groove and was now coming up. The pipe, its sides brushing against the mouth of the well, crawled out of the earth like a long

macaroni strand, the metal ringing stridently, while Keda was waiting for it on the platform with arms outstretched. Its lower part knocked against the boards of the floor. Keda took a short, abrupt leap and, clasping the stand like a baby, carefully and softly pulled it up towards him—another two seconds and he had already thrown a rope over its upper end...

Zhimenko, examining the next stand, noticed that a thick bluish stream was flowing down its evenly worked side, and a few lumps of loose, worked-out clay had gotten stuck at the pipe joint, at the sleeve joint clearances. He approached Sazakov:

"We should take a look at the well. A lot of clay is coming back out for some reason."

Sazakov began moving and smacking his lips.

"It's a lightened solution, that's why the clay has come up. It'll be all right..."

"But what if there's oil? The well will begin to overflow. Kolyshev, give me a match!"

"Go ahead and check," Sazakov waved his hand and smiled. "Check, who knows, maybe there's some Soviet Champagne in the well... The glasses are all ready and there's a snack lying on a napkin."

He winked his beady eyes mockingly. Zhimenko turned his back to him and began climbing down from the plank bridge, carefully maneuvering his feet on the icy steps.

"I *will* check," he grumbled.

Bending down, he crawled under the plank bridge and, knocking his head against the overhead log, muttered an oath. The stand roared by in the dark almost brushing against him—it passed so close that the driller could even smell the damp iron and the earth itself. He belatedly recoiled and, in the patch of light from the aperture, saw the black macaroni strand flash for a moment and go up, looking smaller and smaller. When he made his way to the mouth, his boots bogged down in something thick and sticky.

Then he struck a match, but the flame barely managed to blaze up before it was extinguished by a gust of wind. Zhimenko then fumbled for a few matches and held them together. He lit them by cupping the flame in time on both

sides with his palms. He shone them on the well and trembled—clay was squeezing out like paste from a tube. Like risen dough, it formed lumps and spilled in all directions, bubbles burst with a dull thud and large drops splashed on the floor. A hidden driving force was pushing the immense clay column upward. He had never run into such a thing before—although he had solid experience as an oil worker, Zhimenko had not seen the birth of an oil gusher... But whatever it was, bubbling clay is an abnormal occurrence; therefore, lighting up the growing puddle with matches once more he made his way from under the plank bridge—he had to warn Sazakov and close the well with a preventor—a special device which can plug up any hole in the earth's body like a cork... And tomorrow morning, once it's light, they'll figure out what's wrong.

"The solution is coming out as though someone is pushing it from below," he informed Sazakov. "Maybe we should move over the preventor. Out of harm's way."

"Is the clay coming out strong?"

Zhimenko remembered his words about champagne, glasses, and snacks on a napkin.

"A little stronger... than your fizzy stuff."

"The cost, so to speak, of working too zealously?"

Kolyshev, who overheard the conversation, drew nearer.

"What's wrong?"

"It seems that the well is overflowing... But why should it be? After all, there isn't any oil here."

"I'll go take a look," said Kolyshev.

Zhimenko watched him go and thought—God forbid if he was causing a stir over nothing; if so, the brigade would laugh at him the next day and even the taiga woodgrouse would point their claws at him...

Kolyshev shouted from below:

"Hold the lantern for me!"

Zhimenko took a portable electric lamp from a hook and, pulling behind him the rings of a wire jammed into rubber tubing, shined the light on Kolyshev, who screwed up his eyes, staring under the plank bridge. All the same, nothing could be seen underneath; he took off his mitten and asked for the portable lamp. Zhimenko lowered it by the wire.

Kolyshev clumsily caught it and, blindly gripping the reflector with his mittens, crawled under the plank bridge. Strips of light showed through the chinks. At first Kolyshev's figure slowly moved deep below, then it suddenly jumped aside headlong, and in a second a shout reached Zhimenko. Zhimenko couldn't make out what Kolyshev shouted and mumbled automatically:

"What?"

But his voice sounded so weak that he himself couldn't hear it.

At that time Kolyshev appeared at the edge of the platform and waved his lantern.

"Close the well! And get Keda down! Keda!" he repeated insistently and again waved the lantern in alarm. Unfamiliar notes sounded in Kolyshev's voice, forcing everyone to obey. Sazakov lifted his face, rosy from the frost, and called Keda; at the same moment he looked with amazement under his feet—the head of a stand sealed with clay was crawling out of the opening in the plank bridge with a ringing metallic hiss and slowly moving upward. Without the wrench. By itself! It was going up on its "heels" like a snake charmed by a reed pipe, evenly at first, then its end beginning to rock. Alongside him Keda said hoarsely in disbelief:

"Can we really have struck oil? The preventor... Lord, get the preventor! It's too late..."

The stand curved in an arch and, not bearing its own weight, drove into the earth about eight meters from the plank bridge; above their heads a steel loop—clearly seen, thin, changing its curve before their eyes—kept growing.

"We can't close it off now... Too late... It's oil, you see!" Keda's voice reached everyone's ears, but the meaning of his words didn't sink in right away.

The earth gave an unexpectedly loud, frightening sigh under the plank bridge, and everyone felt the immense emptiness far below, in the depths, where the aroused oil splashed, seethed in waves, gurgled trumpet-like. An ocean of oil. This meant that the Trom-Agansk land was not dead, as the geologists had predicted... It was not hollow. And woe to him who touches the earth's belly with rough, clumsy hands and gives it pain—a terrible spirit will awaken in

the depths, will throw off its drowsy lethargy and rush upwards.

A rumbling tremor resounded under their feet, then another, and another, and another . . . Now the bore pipe crawled freely out of the well without getting stuck at the mouth—the stands moved one after the other, at a faster and faster rate. Then they broke off, and the hundred-meter end which remained in the well suddenly soared into the sky with a heavy whistle, bathing the workers' faces with the familiar sharp smell of gas. Then the first drops of oil sprayed out and the entire body of the earth, the entire Trom-Agansk taiga, all the rivers and glades, swamps and lakes trembled and rocked from an all-devouring explosion which drowned everything for an instant . . . An immense log—a whole tree trunk with the sharp boughs of the fastenings sticking out of its sides—was pulled out of the plank bridge and tossed up, and, slowly rolling through the trembling railing, crashed down on the frozen soil.

The diesel operator Kosykh, his teeth dully gleaming in the darkness, leaped past Zhimenko, dragging his padded jacket behind him like an oil-black wing.

Zhimenko ran down from the plank bridge and looked around—the floor, barely lit by lanterns, began to collapse before his eyes, the boards jumped in various directions and, wobbling in the air, flew, off into the taiga. Then, along side the body of the derrick, a black frost-covered column ascended and soared out of sight; large dark objects flew up—fragments of the transmission—and rang against the cross-beam of the derrick, where the derrick operator's platform is located. And, just like a gun firing, the gusher exploded in pink flame, brilliantly lighting the taiga for many kilometers. Zhimenko ran off to the edge of the forest and fell into a damp ditch which gave off a pungent smell of mushrooms fresh from the forest. When he looked out, he almost screamed with pain—his face was bathed in stinging heat. Thick clouds of smoke enveloped the earth, and the snow was quickly melting. He unbuttoned his padded jacket and pulled it over his head; then, jumping out of the ditch, he ran towards the houses. While running, he saw that the black ant-like figures of the men were also moving away from the houses, running towards the Trom-Aganka, to-

wards the edge of the taiga, which gave off an orange glitter in the light.

"Where are they going?" the unuttered question stuck on his tongue.

Zhimenko ran, feeling his exhausted heart pounding in his breast, his jerky breath was weakening, a repulsive nausea filled his throat.

He ran up to the last hut, its doors wide open and nobody inside, and caught sight of a long, branched path of domino pieces arranged on the table. A plucked bird's carcass lay on the bench and, its barrel towards the wall, a small-caliber rifle rested in a corner.

"Kosykh. That's his rifle," Zhimenko thought, as if of something irrelevant.

At this moment Kosykh was sitting behind a thick cedar stump at the edge of the taiga and loudly hiccuping, unable to take his eyes off the gusher glowing high above. Before his eyes the flame blazed up brightly—it had grabbed hold of a barrel of solar oil. The forty-meter derrick became raspberry red-hot and began to melt down noiselessly to the foot of the flame; then the high angular body of the transmission blackened for a long time, unwilling to submit to the fire. But it too was soon glowing, twinkling with star-like sparks. The flame leaped up higher still, as if some invisible stoker were tossing in fuel down below, and the din increased until one's eardrums began to ache. Stunned by this picture, Kosykh backed away from the cedar stump into the depths of the taiga, stumbling over fallen branches. Then with a desperate scream, he suddenly fell and slid down somewhere along a gentle slope, and saw that his boot-covered legs were up to their knees in water.

"The Trom-Aganka," flashed through his head.

The powerful body of a large fish rushed headlong from under his feet. The fish could be seen gliding for several meters under the surface of the water and then, banging its tail resoundingly like a spade on the river's smooth surface, it descended to the depths. Kosykh noticed thick-finned spikes on the fish's back. A sturgeon.

He crawled out of the water and, grunting, clutching at the cedar and pussy willow branches, began making his way upward. There, in the uneven light, he noticed that

the top of his right boot had been slit, as if cut into strips by a blunt object. The sturgeon had caught it on its spike. Kosykh pulled off one boot and poured the water out. He didn't pour it out of the torn boot but, stepping on a fallen branch, knocked his heel against it several times, watching the water squelch out.

Then he remembered the comrades he had left at the drilling site, and wondered how they were.

Sazakov had run up to the edge of the forest together with Kolyshev and Keda and now, sad, his brain crystal clear, he sat on a little hillock with an apathetic look, feeling neither the wet frozen earth under him nor the blistering heat sunnily shining in his face. He was smoking a thick cigarette, swollen from the moisture, hiding the red flame, which gave off stinking smoke, in his sleeve. He wasn't frightened by either the explosion of the gas and oil spewing out from the depths or by the fact that they had discovered the field so unexpectedly . . . He sat apathetic to everything that was happening, blamed himself, and listened both to the din of the burning gusher and the loud, confused conversation between Keda and Kolyshev. Their first fear had already vanished and a sharp curiosity was left.

"Listen, what's the height of a cedar?" Keda was interested for some unknown reason.

"A cedar? Oh, about twenty five meters," Kolyshev answered.

"That means the average height of the taiga is twenty five meters."

"So what?"

"I'm calculating the height of the flame. It's six times as high as the taiga. That comes to about a hundred and fifty meters."

"Oh, go on . . ."

"Don't say 'go on', I'm no horse," Keda said irritably. "And what about the temperature of the flame, what do you think?"

"At a distance? You think I'm a walking thermometer? . . . About two thousand."

Keda spit on his finger and held it out in front of him.

"There's no wind. How cold is it d'you think?"

"About two below."

"At minus two add five degrees for each meter of space. The gusher is four hundred meters away. Two thousand degrees, and you have to add five hundred more for the initial heating..." He fell silent and took a look at the solitary Sazakov. Seeing that they were looking at him, he leaned against the ground and felt crushed crowberries break under his plump palms; this aroused a feeling of disgust, as if he had squashed some beetles, and he jerked his hand back and looked at it—his hand was decorated with the bitter blackish-blue juice. He rubbed it on the snow, cleaning off the juice stain, and then got up with a jerk.

"What'll we do?" he asked.

"We've got to go to the radio transmitter," said Keda, "and report the fire. They'll help..."

Sazakov stood with his head lowered for a few seconds, then uneasily shifted from one foot to the other like a schoolboy and uttered with angry grief:

"Why did I pump in a lightened solution? But who knew there was oil here?"

"Don't be downcast. Every cloud has a silver lining..." Keda reassured him.

Not answering, Sazakov set out towards the houses through the sparse growth of trees, grabbing the tree trunks with his hands, leaning on them so that it looked as though he was moving the trees apart, clearing the road. Keda and Kolyshev followed him.

According to schedule the drilling brigade made radio communications at six p.m. and twelve midnight; at ten there was an optional emergency broadcast, in case someone hurt himself at the drilling rig or provisions ran out. As a rule, the ten o'clock air waves were empty, and other departments communicated in distant voices. Vasilich, the extremely punctual foreman of the brigade where deputy chief of the central board Chertiuk was at the time, turned on the radio transmitter "just in case", as they say.

He returned from the drilling rig to his *balok*—a temporary house on runners—at about ten. He wiped the large dirty footprints from the linoleum floor with a damp besom, brought in some water from the barrel, and, glad that he

was alone and that nobody would pester him with questions and requests, sat down at a little table. He clicked the lever of the radio transmitter.

It was an old model and didn't warm up at once; it took three to five minutes for the receiver to let out a faint crackle, howl, the cheep of the Morse code, distorted voices.

As usual the foreman heard a voice this time, at first far off, then quickly approaching and beginning to rattle like a drum.

"ERS—02, ERS—02, ERS—12 speaking. Repeating the report. . . Repeating the report."

The alerted Vasilich quickly pulled a lined order blank from the desk, turned its clean, rough side up, and, getting a ball-point pen ready, scratched the point several times against the table to clean the dust off.

"At eight hours forty minutes at drilling rig twelve oil was discovered unexpectedly. The gusher struck. A few seconds later gas and oil appeared and fire broke out. The drilling equipment burned up. All the men are alive and well. No one has been wounded or burned. Urgently request help. Foreman of brigade number twelve Sazakov. ERS—02, ERS—12, speaking . . . Did you understand me? Receiving!"

In response the husky, rich crackling of the radio operator's bass could be heard, saying that he had received the report. The foreman ran his eyes over the lines, woven together from neat little letters, and then, moving the sheet away in his outstretched hand, reread the text. Suddenly there was a stab in his heart and a shadow crossed his face. Lord, his grandson, Vitka Yuriev, was a derrick operator on the twelfth. How is he? But, after all, there are no wounded . . . The foreman looked around, perplexed.

"I'd better alert the authorities . . ."

He bent over, pulled up the tops of his old boots which were sliding down, and headed for the door, feeling the nasty cold sear his back under the shoulder blades. He tramped along the sidewalk to Chertiuk's *balok*, listening both to the thud of his boots and to the ringing of the stars twinkling in the sky, which had cleared up towards night, and he thought that he never used to hear the stars ringing, for some reason . . . When he approached the *balok*, he knocked at the door and, more guessing than hearing a

faint "come in," pushed it open. It was as hot as Africa inside, and Chertiuk was half lying on the bed, his shirt unbuttoned, and rubbing his shoulder; through his fingers a bumpy scar could be seen. "Probably a war wound," the foreman thought for some reason, and Chertiuk, as if ashamed of his scar and bare, unbuttoned chest, smiled guiltily and in a constrained voice invited the foreman to sit down.

He didn't sit, but, smoothing out the paper with the report, handed it to Chertiuk.

"Here, Fedor Fedorovich, I tuned in on the emergency broadcast at ten," he said in a trembling voice, "and took my bearings as they say. Drilling rig twelve sent a message..."

The guilty smile still on his face, Chertiuk straightened out the paper, and his eyes seemed to stumble over the even rows. He threw the paper on the table and a sickly pallor spread over his cheekbones.

"Where have they put up the pilots?" he asked, evidently recalling that he had a helicopter at his disposal.

"They're not far—they were allotted the second *balok* from the end. What, do you need them?"

"Just the crew commander, not the others."

"I'll send for him right away—I'll have him called," the foreman hurried.

"Do please," Chertiuk requested.

Soon the helicopter pilot arrived, an enormous man wearing a jacket with a beaver-lamb collar and short sleeves, his gigantic fists sticking out up to the wrists. He came in silently and without saying a word took a seat on a stool and rested his fists on his knees.

"Have you ever flown at night?" Chertiuk asked.

The helicopter pilot raised his fist. Without unclenching his fingers, he smoothed his hair.

"I did when I served in the air force."

"Could you do it now?"

"I could, but they won't let me."

"And what if I get you permission by radio?"

"It's no use. Even for you they won't allow it."

"But would you go at your own risk?"

The helicopter pilot once again smoothed his hair with his fist.

"I can't. If they find out they'll discharge me. And if they discharge me..." he stopped short and gave Chertiuk a look which made clear what this enormous and probably brave man feared most of all. "If he's afraid it means he must have been discharged from the air force for a similar flight. And once burned, he's now twice as cautious."

"You'll only go tomorrow, then?" he asked, frowning, sorry that he couldn't fly to the fire and lend his support today... Chertiuk himself was familiar with oil gushers, and had also completed a course in Baku which was devoted precisely to extinguishing fires of this type.

"Do we have far to fly?" the pilot asked.

"About two hundred kilometers."

"Where to exactly?"

"To drilling rig twelve", said the foreman standing by the door. "On the Trom-Aganka..."

The pilot was silent, figuring something out, then unsealed his swollen lips.

"Add fifty kilometers. It'll be two hundred and fifty," he got up and put his hands in his jacket pockets. "What happened?"

"There's a fire," the foreman said.

"So-o", the pilot drawled and shook his head, a stubborn, even embittered expression appearing on his face. "Well, here goes!"

And, without asking the consent of Chertiuk, who after their conversation could have changed his mind—to fly at night in a helicopter without navigational equipment could cost their lives—he left the *balok*.

Chertiuk hastily began packing his travel things in his briefcase and thought about the fact that every new field inevitably brought a new fire. Fire and oil always go together. They discovered the Berezovo field and struggled with the monstrous gusher for nine months; they discovered the Tazovsk field, and there was a double ejection of gas and the drilling instrument at the Mamei Cape; they had barely controlled the ejection when the tundra began to shake under the gusher which burst into flame two weeks later; they discovered the Urengoi field and gas shot out of the earth and caught fire at once near the village of Tarko-Sale on the bank of the Pur-pe River...

Chertiuk hurried, and his own haste—his nervousness and jerky movements, his abnormal state of mind—all seemed to him pitiful and fussy. He was by nature a sensitive and easily flustered person—now, for example, he was flustered by the presence of Vasilich, who stood pointlessly frozen by the door, but he couldn't send him away—for some reason he wasn't up to it. And besides, there were these handkerchiefs, socks, a mirror—as if he were a well-groomed young lady who couldn't live in the taiga without some scented batiste rag—and Chertiuk invariably scolded his wife... To distract himself he began to think about fires and the people who work in the oil industry. Yes, oil and fire always exist side by side. The chronicle of the oil and gas industries consists not only of impressive figures showing the wealth extracted from the earth—it is also a tragic list of immense and savage fires. One of the most terrible occurred at the raised wells in the Gulf of Mexico. One of the Shell Oil Company wells got out of control—an oil gusher struck and was immediately transformed into a torch. The first news of the catastrophe was short and bitter. If the report of the foreman of drilling rig twelve contained the sentence "All men are safe", then the report from the Gulf of Mexico well said, "Four men have perished, thirty two are seriously wounded..." After the first well the neighboring ones also flared up, and soon an immense segment of the earth on the Gulf of Mexico shore was a solid sea of fire. Driven by the wind, the heavy oily smoke from the fire moved on to New Orleans.

Shell Oil's fire-fighting technology was among the best in the world, but for quite a long time it couldn't cope with the fire. They had to drill a new, so-called inclined well, and pour bentonite into it...

Chertiuk remembered some of the details of the struggle with that fire: he remembered that it was put out by six hundred and fifty first-class specialists, who appeared at the scene in a few hours; he remembered that they succeeded in covering one well from helicopter with a metal roof; that the oil seriously polluted the sea. Vessels could not approach the shore because both earth and iron melted in the fire—the sea was boiling—and it was a long time before they could determine which well was spewing the oil

out into the gulf. Shell had to spray a special substance; two vessels towed an immense raft carrying tanks, and the crew cleaned the thick oil slick from the sea by hand...

The amount of damage done by this fire was comparable to that in the famous Mexican forest fire of 1969. The loss in dollars reached eight digits...

"Yes. Eight digits," Chertiuk repeated aloud, closing the locks of his briefcase.

"Be extra careful there," the foreman warned, jerking up his chin covered with bristle to indicate the blackening sky outside the *balok's* window. "Have the helicopter fly a little higher so the flame can be seen from far off. A fire is visible at night for about a hundred kilometers for sure. No less. And one more thing... Fedor Fedorovich, I have a favor to ask you. My grandson is at the twelfth rig... Vitka... Victor Yuriev. He's young man, he's likely to do something rash. Keep an eye on him, won't you? There's nobody there with him..."

This grandfatherly concern filled Chertiuk with a warm feeling, and his recent irritation disappeared completely.

"All right," said Chertiuk. "I promise to keep an eye on him."

"Well, best of luck then," Vasilich said quietly and stretched out his hand first; Chertiuk offered him his own and felt the mounds of callouses, hard as wood, on the foreman's palm.

"Good luck to you too," he said. Then he looked around the *balok* to make sure he hadn't left anything. He thought with regret that he hadn't had time to finish his work at this oilfield and would have to go unprepared to the central board meeting...

Outside Chertiuk was astonished by the clear sky, thickly studded with stars, and recalled his conversation with the helicopter pilot—neither he nor the pilot had said a word about the weather, as if it didn't exist at all. You never remember the weather when it's good, but you curse for all you're worth when it doesn't let you fly—at such times the weather is constantly on your mind.

The Mi-4 stood on the even, well-trampled air strip, situated on the bank of a small lake. The helicopter itself wasn't visible, but a blue light burning in the cockpit could

be seen from afar and a lantern was lit in the open cargo compartment; it snatched a bright canary-colored bench and the chipped side of a fire-extinguisher from the darkness.

Chertiuk, grabbing the handrail, got into the hold and winced when he seated himself on the bench from the pain stabbing his wounded shoulder.

The pilot glanced in the hold and knit his light, barely visible brows in amazement:

"Here already?"

Chertiuk nodded.

"And I thought you'd be a long time getting ready."

"As you see, I wasn't." Chertiuk raised his coat collar, shutting himself off from everything around him. It was essential for him to gather his wits. The pilot gave his own interpretation to the gesture.

"After the take-off we'll turn on the heaters. It'll get warmer."

"The sooner the better," Chertiuk responded, not wishing to dissuade him.

The propeller over the roof began to fidget and turn, shots of smoke cracked in the exhaust pipes, and the body of the helicopter started to tremble and shake. Chertiuk was lost in thought and missed the instant they took off—he looked through the porthole, but the lights of the oil rig had already disappeared from view. Only the invisible taiga, buried in the impenetrable inky darkness, could be felt dimly. He listened to the drone of the engine, and suddenly a familiar march rhythm filled his ears—a helicopter's hum disposes people either to sleep or to music.

After about twenty minutes the flight mechanic descended from the cockpit and shouted in his ear:

"The fire can already be seen. But it's still far away."

Chertiuk glanced through the mica window—the night outside was black as before, only the gleam of the stars visible.

"Step into the cockpit. You can't see it from here, but you can from there."

Chertiuk climbed the stairs. The pilots' faces were dimly lit by the burning instrument dials. A meter clicked loudly. Chertiuk looked out into the night. The flame itself was not yet visible, strictly speaking—just pink lightning

was tossing about on the horizon, as though the sun were playing beyond the far edge of the earth.

"We've still got a lot of flying to do," the white-haired pilot shouted in his ear.

Oh, fire, fire. They say "Every oilfield has its fire." Or: "Every oil well has its torch." In working a well approximately six hundred tons of crude oil flows out into a specially dug earthen pool. This oil thickens to the consistency of vaseline—you can spread it on bread if you like—and then it is burned. It smokes for many days, spitting ash on the trees. At night Megion, Nizhnevartovsk, and Surgut are in the grips of the fire's lightning—the gas, a valuable fuel and excellent chemical raw material, is burning. In Surgut, it's true, they solved the problem—they built an enormous thermoelectric power station; a lot has been written about it in the newspapers, government representatives came—but what about other Siberian cities? Nowhere—not in Bashkiriya, or in Central Asia or in Azerbaijan or in Byelorussia—do they burn gas as mercilessly and openly as in Siberia. Lightning flashes have become a customary part of the landscape—that's how it is! Haven't we grown too accustomed to fires?

... At this moment neither Sazakov, nor the two K's, nor the white-haired helicopter pilot, nor the foreman Vasilich, nor Chertiuk himself knew—nobody knew yet—that the duty pilots at the Tyumen and Nizhnevartovsk airports had already leaped into action, that the alert had reached Moscow, that they had already begun to load cumbersome equipment onto barges in feverish haste, so they could get it to the Trom-Aganka, over twenty five hundred kilometers away, before the water freezes over. Special squads and fire departments were put on alert. In a word, at this moment everything was being done to help the stricken oil well.

The night flight seemed alarming and, oh, so long to Chertiuk—probably because it was dangerous and perhaps because he couldn't stand the dark... He gave a sigh of relief only when they came down for a landing, making a semicircle around the bright flame, brighter than an acetylene torch, flat and nimble as an eel, and as long as an eel. His face was bathed with heat through the mica porthole, and he shielded himself with his palm, trying to examine the

torch. But at this time the Mi-4 had turned its tail towards the fire and was soaring very low above the earth and houses—the commander was looking for the most convenient landing site. The light specks of stones and the earth, sparkingly wet from the melted snow, flashed before his eyes. A pile of firewood with a red, ragged flag dangling on it rushed by, and beyond the pile Chertiuk saw the damp side of a log hut very close up.

“What are huts doing here”, thought Chertiuk. “Did they build themselves mansions or something? What nonsense...”

The helicopter carefully came down alongside the woodpile, raising a column of damp sand which drummed against the side of the vehicle like a machine-gun burst and pasted up the window through which Chertiuk was looking.

The flight mechanic jumped down from above and kicked open the door. Chertiuk got up and wanted to go out, but the flight mechanic stretched out his hand to stop him and then stared in confusion at the ceiling, where the tow ropes were trembling like guitar strings. The flight mechanic darted up the stairs to the cockpit, but soon came tumbling down again and said in confusion:

“We turned off the motor, but it’s working for some reason.”

“That’s the gusher roaring.”

The flight mechanic looked outside and, reassured, waved his hand—the vane, first bending low to the ground, then leaping high, had stopped right above the exit.

“I looked at the instruments and the engine was shut off,” the flight mechanic wiped the sweat from his forehead, “but the helicopter keeps shaking. We don’t pay any attention to the sound, just to the vibration.”

A man was running at the side of the wood pile, bent low, holding a hard hat which was falling off his head with his hands.

“Who did you bring?” he asked in a hoarse voice, and licked his lips. He looked funny to Chertiuk: a small nose, small eyes, and thin lips on a face as broad as a steering wheel.

The flight mechanic shot a glance at Chertiuk.

“We brought you this comrade...”

He didn't finish because Chertiuk interrupted him.

"Deputy chief of administration..."

"Comrade Chertiuk!" the broad-faced fellow joined in and his bird-like eyes flashed furiously. "I'm foreman of the drilling brigade Sazakov."

Ivan Kosykh returned to the drillers' settlement last, when he was convinced that there was no danger. As though nothing had happened, he drank his fill of water in the passageway, banging his mug against the pail. Coming into the room, he saw Polikashin and carelessly nodded in the direction of the torch.

"Quite a little flame, huh?"

Polikashin didn't answer; he was sulking gloomily in a corner, resting his back against a humped log projecting from a wall.

"Why don't you say something, gramps? Cat get your tongue?" Without waiting for an answer, Kosykh shuffled across the floor in his torn boot. "Gramps, did you ever see a sturgeon who could tear a boot like that? He could hook right into your bone..."

"What, did a sturgeon really do that?" Polikashin asked coldly.

"The devil only knows. Maybe it was a piece of iron," Kosykh frowned. "It got caught, I don't remember where. But in general it was a sturgeon that tore my boot. It was like when I worked at the fishing artel. Only then it was a rubber boot..."

"You worked? Couldn't be you were poaching?"

"Harping again on the same thing. If someone says white you blabber on about black..."

Polikashin stirred in the corner, looking out the window; specks of light ran across his face, making it unrecognizable, strange.

"Why don't you turn on the light? Are you getting both your light and heat from the gusher?" Kosykh snorted.

"Why burn electricity for nothing? It'll come in handy..."

"Oh, aren't you thrifty."

"I'm no equal for you... You count every cent of your money, but you spend others' like it's going out of style..."

Kosykh's good nature vanished. He dashed to the corner

and grabbed Polikashin by the brest of his quilted jacket.

"Say that again!"

"Why should I?" Polikashin tore Kosykh's hands from his jacket and said in a ringing voice but evenly as usual: "Keep your hands to yourself, Warrior. You'll get clipped if you don't mind your step."

Kosykh turned sharply, like a soldier at a drill. Restraining himself, he said peaceably:

"The tongue doesn't have any bones, but it can really give you a thrashing. Gramps, why don't you take back your holier than thou words, huh?"

"A word's not a bird." Polikashin responded, "once it's flown out you can't get it back."

"All right, philosopher," said Kosykh in a cold voice. "What, you didn't stew the woodgrouse?"

"Stew it yourself."

"And what about you, moralist, you're not going to eat meat?"

"No, I'm not."

"You're full?"

Polikashin didn't answer.

"And who came visiting in a helicopter? The higher ups?"

"One of the chiefs..."

Kosykh gave a breathy sigh:

"Let's have a snooze in the meanwhile. For about six hundred minutes."

Polikashin stirred and, with his palm, swept the bread crumbs, clearly visible in the light of the gusher, off the table.

"I'd like to get you before a court of honor for that woodgrouse..."

"That's going way too far," Kosykh responded. "This isn't the time for a court of honor. We should be trying a few people in a real court."

There was also a conversation under way in another hut. Fedor Fedorovich Chertiuk no sooner appeared than he asked to have the stove heated up. Then, taking his cap off and scratching his gray hair, he asked Sazakov, who was standing tensely in the middle of the room:

"How did you happen to strike oil? Huh? And why don't

you sit down? It's too late to save the oil rig and drive the oil back in."

Sazakov seated himself on the stool nearest him and placed his hard hat on his knee.

"Who knew there was oil here?" he muttered, losing track of his thoughts; he felt timid before this gray-haired, widely experienced man invested with so much authority. "It was an exploratory well. The geology is unsuitable for oil. We were drilling just to make sure there wasn't a whiff of oil. And now you see how it smells of it... Wherever you poke a drill the earth answers with oil."

"Did you pump in clay?" Chertiuk got up and, frowning and wheezing, pulled off his coat, folded it in two, and put it on the bed.

"Yes we did." Sazakov's eyes groped along the porous floor boards until they came to an immense nail head, unevenly lopped off and edged with a faded rust spot which looked like the silhouette of a woman's head, and he didn't take his eyes off it, as if the essence of his answer was to be found in that spot and nail head. "I'm to blame for the well overflowing. Only I..."

"Whether you're to blame or not isn't the point. I don't think you're to blame," said Chertiuk in a harsh tone unusual for him (oh, how much he disliked this tone and how rarely he resorted to it). "For what, to be exact?"

"I ordered a lightened solution to be pumped into the well."

"So... To speed things up?"

"But nobody expected oil. The well as drilled as if it were empty, unproductive. We didn't expect oil," Sazakov repeated in a bitter voice. "No..."

"You didn't expect it," Chertiuk mimicked him. "And as a result we have a whole oilfield. At what depth did the oil begin?"

"It was shallow... Nine hundred and ninety meters."

"What a coincidence—lightened clay and oil at an extremely shallow depth. One chance in a million. So. Why don't you go and rest? Until six in the morning. At six—all hands' job. We'll begin clearing the site."

Bending, he glanced out the window and peered at the immense raging tongue, at the red-hot, thickly tangled strips

of iron heaped up on the ground, at the gloomy hulk of the burnt-out transmission. He saw the shaggy rank of clouds floating from the west, as if hurrying to warm themselves by the fire . . .

Sazakov got up from the stool and went out almost without a sound. Chertiuk rested his hand on the table, washed almost white, and thought that the gusher was too powerful—a million and twelve cubic meters of oil and gas out the window. Every day.

"Every day," he confirmed aloud, watching the edge of the clouds already approach the tongue, and the fire pierce it easily, shining faintly through the dense, wadded screen.

Chertiuk had seen many fires in his life—more than he could count. He frowned from the shooting pain in his shoulder—how many times already that day. The pain also reminded him of fire, of how they broke through the heat of battle from Dnepropetrovsk, wrapped in swirls of smoke, to the splinter-strewn river bank, and were the first to cross to the other side, still held by the enemy. There was hand-to-hand fighting in the trenches, cruel and terrible. They fought with whatever was at hand—bayonets, saper's shovels, rifle and submachine gun butts. Lieutenant Chertiuk had used up the cartridges in his pistol, his spare cartridge clips were all spent, and he fought with his pistol handle and his fist—it was a good thing he had plenty of strength to spare. And his orderly Fedya Svishchev was walking behind him, covering him—he handled a submachine gun like a club. Shots couldn't be heard in this strange battle; there were only the sounds of snorting, dull muffled blows, obscenities, and the occasional cries of the wounded. Then a mad Nazi in a wet T-shirt stinking of sweat jumped out from a side niche and plunged a bayonet into Chertiuk's shoulder, pulled it out and raised it for a second strike—it would have been curtains for the company commander if Svishchev hadn't jumped up and hit the Nazi with the splintered butt of his submachine gun. The German just gave a strained moan and fell on his back . . . They sent Chertiuk across the Dnieper to a medical station and from there to the hospital, and he lost track of his company.

He barely slept that night—he lay face up on the cot until morning, stroking his wounded shoulder, and dozed off

right before dawn. But once he had dozed off a crash resounded as if a volley had been fired; it made Chertiuk instantly jump to his feet and twist his head wildly. A bluish-gray rock had gotten stuck in the side of the hut, ripping through the logs like a missile. Only a second earlier it had been deep in the earth; the gusher had spit it out and, with the force of a missile, had thrust it into the closest hut.

The dry moss, used instead of puttie to plug the holes in the log butts, burst into flame. Chertiuk grabbed the tea kettle from the stove and threw water on the flame. The steam fired back cruelly in his face and burned his cheeks. Flinging himself back, Chertiuk splashed more water.

Then, calmed down, he thought that if the rock fell thirty centimeters to the right, it would hit him as sure as day. The window was in smithereens from the blow and crystal fragments gleamed not only on the floor, but on the table and blanket.

Chertiuk plugged up the window with a pillow. "I'll have to forbid curiosity seekers from walking around the danger line of the settlement," he concluded wearily.

In the morning Chertiuk arrayed himself in rough work clothes, and in the regulation plastic hard hat.

"Is the bulldozer in operation?" he shouted to Sazakov, who couldn't hear anything from the roar of the gusher. He screamed an answer, but inaudibly; in the terrible din people were like fish flung from the water—their mouths opened and lips moved, but their voices couldn't be heard. The gusher bellowed. The earth trembled under their feet . . .

Sazakov put his finger behind his ear to show that he couldn't hear anything and then, digging in his pocket, he offered Chertiuk a pad, stained with machine oil.

"It's time to clear the site. Is the bulldozer in operation?" Chertiuk wrote in a large hand and returned the pad to the foreman. The latter nodded several times, indicating that there was a bulldozer and that it was in operation. His lips moved—Sazakov had uttered something . . . What? It couldn't be made out. Chertiuk recalled that there was a totally deaf thirty-year-old engineer working in the ministry in Moscow—it had happened when he was fighting an oil fire at Mangyshlak. He remembered that he himself, when he had returned from the Pur-pe, couldn't hear any street

noises for four days—automobile horns, the ringing of the streetcar, the voices of passers-by. He too had become deaf.

"Order tank helmets on the radio transmitter, or else we'll all go deaf," he wrote on the pad and showed it to Sazakov, who bowed his head once more.

After about twenty minutes the noiseless bulldozer crawled past, and moved towards the burning well. It dug its teeth into a felled tree and caught it up together with some rust-eaten boxes, dragged them to the Trom-Aganka, and pushed them down. Then the bulldozer backed up. Chertiuk looked around—the edge of the taiga was quite far from the well, which meant that they wouldn't have to fell trees to specially clear a "vital space". To the left the road made a gap in the taiga. "Apparently leads to the old well," he thought... Then he took the pad again and wrote: "What is a village doing here? Was it abandoned, or what?"

Sazakov, adjusting the pad on his knee, spit on the stub and wrote painstakingly, "Seismologists lived here for a whole year before us. They built it." Then scratching his forehead with his finger, he added, "We inherited the village."

"You live in luxury!" Chertiuk wrote in response. "Let's go look at the helicopter field."

They had barely passed the houses when the din grew weaker and stopped hammering in their ears. Strangely enough in the houses themselves it was barely audible.

"We have a whole airport here," Sazakov explained. "We'll be there in a minute and you'll see. There, beyond the hill..."

Sazakov stopped suddenly.

"Wait a minute. I'll get my gun just in case," he shouted. "After all, it's the taiga!..." and he went skipping off to his house, crowned by a radio antenna. He barely had time to enter when he dashed out again, dragging on his shoulder a double-barreled rifle which slapped against his side and a belt packed with cartridges. Panting noisily, he caught up with Chertiuk.

"Just in case," he hit his rifle butt with his palm. "It's the taiga, after all."

The fairly well-smoothed glade which Sazakov had called the airport suited Chertiuk—the area was flat, the sand

fine and hard, slightly touched by the frost. It was clear that there had formerly been something like an airport here—some landmarks were even preserved here and there. They had only to hew some new ones and put them on the lines and tie colored flags to them. Both airplanes and helicopters could land here. All types except for the heavy transport helicopter, the Mi-6, which was needed to transport bulldozers, fire engines, winches and cranes—and a new derrick which would be needed as soon as the fire was driven into branch pipes. Therefore they would have to allot a patch of land for the Mi-6 somewhere else and lay it with concrete slabs. Sazakov seemed to read his thoughts.

"There's a good bare patch for 'Mikhail the Sixth!'"

"What did you say?"

"A bare patch. For the airstrip, right?"

"But what did you call the helicopter?"

"'Mikhail the Sixth.' So what?"

"You give it a tsar's name."

They walked along the edge of the field, leaving a dense line of footprints behind them.

The bare patch that Sazakov had promised was a spur of the field powdered with blindingly white unmelted snow—the heat hadn't reached here. A cutting in the woods curved off to the side and swung towards the houses.

"We might not need slabs," Sazakov said. "We'll lay logs. We'll have to widen the cutting anyway."

"All right," Chertiuk nodded.

Suddenly Sazakov rushed forward, stopped a couple of steps from Chertiuk, and, bending over, examined a track in the snow—the paw prints were long, strongly embedded, with deep scratches left by the claws.

"It smacks of a bear," Sazakov shouted. "The track is fresh. The dirty rat—he goes circling around the village as if he's not planning to nap for the winter... The loafer. He's a dangerous bear."

"At a gusher everything is dangerous," Chertiuk thought gloomily, "fire, gas, rocks flying from a kilometer underground, and now a bear."

"He's lying in wait for a man. A loafer who doesn't hibernate at all is the most ferocious kind. There's another

kind of lazy rascal—he doesn't build himself a lair, and when the snow falls he just barely buries himself. When the freezing weather hits his rear starts stinging and he wakes up from the cold. He jumps up and is off to make mischief in the taiga. God forbid that you should meet him at such a time. Be more careful, Fedor Fedorovich," he warned, "don't go close to the bushes."

Chertiuk stepped away from the solid green fence of underbrush, on top of which a cedar cone lay with bristly open clusters, nuts visible buried deep in the dark grooves. He looked at it perplexedly—what, I really can't take it? Out of the corner of his eye he saw Sazakov quickly open his double-barreled rifle and loaded it with a cartridge. Then, without looking, he pulled a second one from his pocket and also jammed it into the barrel.

"It really smacks strongly of a bear?" Chertiuk asked and stopped short.

From behind the underbrush, right where the nut-filled cone was lying, there appeared a large tousled head, knobby with uneven growths of hair. The animal opened its mouth wide, as if yawning, and a hoarse but menacing roar hit them in the face. The bear stood up on its hind legs and was transformed into a giant. He was immense, as taiga animals can be—his head touched the fir branches. Chertiuk didn't have a chance to get frightened or think about anything before Sazakov's voice sounded:

"Go away, boy, without a fight. It's better if you go away..."

The bear passed its paw along the underbrush, and the cedar cone, scattering its kernels, fell with a thud at Chertiuk's feet. It seemed that in another instant the bear would move apart the fence separating him and the men and would rush forward. Sazakov raised his rifle. Chertiuk distinctly heard both cocks click almost simultaneously.

"Let's part peacefully," Sazakov coaxed the bear.

He didn't move, and Sazakov brought the gun to his shoulder in a slow, very precise movement. The bear blinked in confusion, raised his wrinkled upper lip in displeasure, and bared his yellow, battle-scarred incisors. He then suddenly dashed off in a hurry, hiding behind the bushes, and went away, swaying from side to side.

"It's better that way," said Sazakov, lowering his rifle. He caught his breath.

"Uh-huh. Take a look," Chertiuk, warily glancing at the underbrush, bent over the cone. "He gave us nuts as a present."

"We can thank him for that." Sazakov looked around guardedly. His enormous face became gloomy. "I had a comrade—we worked together as drillers before I went to technical college. He used to go bear hunting with a small-caliber rifle. He had a really sharp eye. Let's go, all right?" He flung the rifle over his shoulder, but didn't unload it or lower the cocks.

"The bear won't come back? He can cripple people, after all..."

"He won't come back," Sazakov shook his head confidently. "Otherwise, what was the point of our heart-to-heart talk? Once, it's true, a bear did up and return after such a talk. Well, we decided to punish it, and my friend and I got into a ZIL-113 truck and followed its trail. It was snowing lightly. We caught up with him. When he saw the truck he jumped on the hood. My friend stuck out his gun, but didn't have time to shoot before the bear bashed the barrel with its paw, and the rifle turned over in his hands and knocked half my friend's jaw out of joint with the butt. And meanwhile I laid the bear out from the other side..."

"Was your comrade all right?"

"Yeah. He spent some time in the hospital and he came round."

When they had climbed the mound they stopped talking. The burning oil roared. The flame faded perceptibly during the day; twisting in the wind, it let out long multi-colored tongues, as though coated with iridescent film. Tearing away, the tongues drifted in immense sheets towards the houses, but dissipated before reaching them.

The hard working bulldozer looked very small and unimposing, crawling about the site, diligently shoving into corners and ditches snags, burnt iron, and drilling pipes, rolled into knots after ejection. Having pushed a usual pile of trash into a pit, it smartly turned around and headed full speed for the wood pile.

"What is it doing?" Chertiuk shouted.

Sazakov shrugged his shoulders in perplexity. When they came up to the pile they saw the bulldozer operator, small and black as a rook, scooping the foaming, beer-like water from the barrel and pouring it over the smoking sides of the machine. The water dried up and turned to steam before it could flow down to the ground.

"We have to get a fire installation immediately, or else the earth and forest will both catch fire," Chertiuk thought, and then looked at his watch—it was exactly eight a.m.... The bulldozer operator awkwardly splashed the hood with the water, and drops of spray as big as buckshot ricocheted from it, inundating people standing nearby from head to toe. Chertiuk wiped his wet face with a handkerchief and raised his eyes. An immense helicopter had imperceptibly crept up and was literally hanging right over his head—"Mikhail the Sixth," Chertiuk recalled—and under its belly a blunt-nosed bulldozer with a broad blade polished to a mirror-like sheen was rocking on twisted cables. Fire fighting began at eight a.m. That's what we'll write down in the logbook. Although it really began earlier—during the night the brigade bulldozer had already crawled into that inferno to clear a "vital space".

By evening they had brought four bulldozers, two cranes set up on powerful, heavy tractors, two "mortars"—jet-propelled fire prevention devices whose short, thick-walled muzzles really made them similar to old fortress weapons, and four winches. Chertiuk, looking at the entry in the logbook, mechanically noted the numerical regularity: four, two, two, four... Like in soccer.

People also arrived—rescue workers and firemen. Major Sergovantsev from Tyumen, thick-set, imperturbable, more like an actor or a pompous gentleman, came by plane. His sense of importance was not without foundation, however, since he was a big specialist in fighting oil fires: not a single torch was put out without him, and he was unusually brave. Sergovantsev was often written up in newspapers—he was a popular figure.

Chertiuk met with him in his hut. Sergovantsev was sitting at the table and, head bent low, was breaking lumps of

sugar with his pocket hunting knife into four perfectly identical cubes. He was getting ready to drink tea.

"My best to Fedor Fedorovich!" Sergovantsev stood up on his stool and bowed politely, which made him look even more like some venerable actor.

Chertiuk sat down on the bench, pulled the hard hat off his head, and, feeling his temples and the back of his head freed from the weight, smoothed his hair.

"Want some tea?" Sergovantsev offered and, although his guest refused, he bent over, pulled out a steaming aluminum tea kettle from under the table, and filled the enamel mugs standing on the table. "Some tea!" he said in a positive, commanding tone and added, as if explaining his peremptory behavior: "It's obligatory once you've come for a visit."

He lowered a porous tea bag attached to a string into each of the mugs and threw the strings over the edge. His immense hands, not at all those of an actor or gentleman, were constantly doing something. They were probably busy even when he slept.

The boiling water was soon a brownish wine color and gave off a warm aroma. Chertiuk gave in and grabbed a mug.

"That's the way . . . While they're getting the suits ready we'll just knock off a mug apiece," Sergovantsev roared.

"Right. That's just what I wanted to talk about. We should get as close as possible to the well. The site will be cleaned in three or four days, and then we can work on the well itself."

"I have two fire-proof suits. Do you want the second? If so, I'll tell the lieutenant not to go with me."

"Whether I want to or not isn't the point. I must go without fail."

At this the conversation ended. They drank the tea in silence, each thinking his own thoughts while at the same time thinking about the same thing. Life at a gusher is the same as at the front—when you get up in the morning you don't know if you'll still be around that night—a gusher can do all kinds of bizarre things.

Sergovantsev ate the sugar quarters like seeds, chomping them loudly. He washed them down with large gulps. While

washing them down he narrowed his eyes goodnaturedly and looked out the window. Then he raked the crumbs together in a newspaper, crumpled it, and tossed it into the battered pail by the door, the property of the driver, judging by the gasoline smell.

"Time to get dressed."

The suits made them look like pilots—zippers in the front and on the sides, hermetic helmets, gloves. Only the weightlessly thin fabric was disturbing—if only it wouldn't burn through. The minimum temperature was two thousand degrees, and you felt undressed in a suit like that—it was hard to believe that such a light fabric wouldn't burn through.

On the way Sergovantsev indicated an iron nozzle protruding from the ground—the site was filled with such nozzles—then, pulling the suit out at the chest, crumpled it with his fingers. Chertiuk guessed that he was warning him to be careful—not to damage his suit.

The suits were dependable—the heat didn't penetrate. They circled around the flame, almost touching it with their shoulders. It wasn't as hot right by the flame as it was twenty-five or thirty meters away... The head of a cast-iron column—the "butt"—stuck out of the mouth. The column itself was driven about four hundred meters into the ground, which is why the gusher hadn't overpowered it. The preventor hung intact above it, almost touching the jet with its side. It was a good thing that the column was there: all they had to do was to weld a flange on to it, place the preventor, and they would be able to drive the fire into the branch pipes. It was too bad, though, that the old preventor was hovering over the well. They would have to place an artillery gun at point-blank range and shoot at it with cast-iron pigs. The oil jet rushed through the column at a furious speed and tore out into the open—it was dangerous to touch it: if you poked your finger in it would tear off your finger, and if you stuck your hand in it would tear off your hand. It was as solid as metal—breaking out of the black column "butt" half a handsbreadth above the ground, it immediately spread to a meter in diameter and soared upwards, bursting into flame far above the ground. The fire couldn't get near the mouth—the pressure of the jet was

too great—and the flame crashed against it and stole off high above. Even projectiles can't cut off such a jet.

A persistent ringing in their ears began from the din, which Chertiuk for some reason compared to frosty stillness, when a thin, stubborn sound suddenly arises in the total silence—perhaps the trees are beginning to sing their sad song, perhaps one's own heart is peaking up—and this ringing lulls a man, makes his sleepy and weak-willed, incapable of resisting...

Chertiuk turned his head several times, trying to shake off the ringing, but it wouldn't let up, and he thought that he wanted only one thing right now, to get farther away from the gusher, that he was feeling like a coward, which was unfitting for him, a front-line fighter. Sergovantsev trudged up from the side (the force of the gusher was evidently affecting him too) and slowly raised his head, and Chertiuk also looked up at the broad cap of the fiery mushroom emitting flat, multi-colored protuberances in the wind. He followed Sergovantsev, amazed at his unhurried pace and the deliberately calm measured swinging of his arms, although he understood that his calm was combined with an intense inner watchfulness...

They took a seat by the wood pile, and Sazakov came out from the protective shade. His face was imperturbable. Chertiuk indicated with his fingers that he needed a pad...

"Will we order equipment to knock down the preventor?"

Having read it, Sergovantsev stubbornly shook his head.

"It's not needed for now. We'll try to pull it off with a rope—we'll throw a loop over it and pull it with a tractor."

Chertiuk agreed.

"Good," he wrote. "Begin watering the site, or else the ground will start to boil."

"No, it won't," Sergovantsev objected. "I have fourteen fire-extinguishers."

"Then start today, in two days, once they clear the way, we'll begin welding the flange. And then it'll be the preventor's turn."

"Is there a welder here?"

"There should be. In the drilling brigade. There's supposed to be one on the staff," Chertiuk answered.

"Is there a welder in the brigade?" he wrote and handed the pad to Sazakov.

He wrote his answer unhurriedly. "Yes. His name is Kosykh."

Without thinking Chertiuk crossed out the foreman's note with a sweeping, hurried stroke: "Relieve him of all work. In two days we'll begin welding the flange. Let him get ready."

For two days Ivan Kosykh strutted like a turkey, as Polikashin put it. He felt like a hero—everyone knew that he and he alone was charged with welding the flange to the column "butt", on which the success of the whole enterprise depended (as on any other operation, however—all operations were equally important). Even Aunt Olya, who couldn't forgive him for killing the woodgrouse, took pity on him and concocted a magnificent soup with aromatic seasonings, fresh onion leaves which she got who knows where—from thin air, dill and carrots, not a soup but a feast—everyone who tried it praised it... And not a word about the luckless woodgrouse.

The day before Kosykh was to go to the flange flocks of migrating ducks appeared in the distant evening sky. The birds were high up—right at the edge of illuminated clouds, and they evidently wanted to fly past, but the bright stream of fire hypnotized and attracted them just as a kerosene lamp draws moths and small insects. First one flock and then others approached the fire. In their V-formation, the birds were clearly visible in the sky. Colored by the flame, they appeared to be ominous visitors from other worlds, until they drew near the tongue of the gusher. Here the formation unexpectedly broke up, the specks of the ducks' bodies bunched together, and the flock suddenly came down in a disorderly mass and streamed into the flame. The scorching hot wind immediately flung the birds' carcasses to the ground, on the sandy shore of the Trom-Aganka. Part of the flock came to its senses and rushed upwards, but it was too late—only a few ducks escaped the torch, and the next flock was already diving into the fire from high in the sky.

The first who realized what was happening was Ivan Kosykh, and he dashed towards the house, stumbling in

the dark with a resounding thud against empty metal boxes and cursing. He grabbed a paper sack from bentonite in the passage and rushed to the Trom-Aganka, anxious beforehand that somebody might get there first. And he was so irritated at the thought that he began seeing in the dark almost as clearly as in daylight.

He saw that the narrow Trom-Aganka was covered with a cloud of steam, like a boiling pot put out in the snow to cool. By the shore, where something could still be made out, he saw several boiled white-sided fish—you just had to drag them out, sprinkle them with salt, and you could have a snack! During the daytime a strong wind had bent the tongue of the flame down towards the Trom-Aganka, and several dozen perch and other fish had been baked together. There was a sharp smell of burning coming from the branches of the underbrush and pussy willows framing the stream—the dying ducks were still rustling there. Kosykh grabbed one close by, which fluttered under his hand in its last mortal effort, and he grimaced in commiseration.

"Oh, duckie," Kosykh suddenly muttered compassionately, "what a thing to do... Geese are more cunning, I guess—they jump over a fire or fly around it."

Then, as if recalling that pity was out of place, he threw the carcass to the bottom of the sack, seized the next one by the claws and threw it in too, and another, and another... He pushed forward, feeling the sack getting heavier—there soon wouldn't be anywhere to put any more, and the next flock was pouring from the sky. It looked like snipe. Also edible game! One of them swiped Ivan on the back, but not as strongly as a duck would have.

"Oh, you duckies," he muttered with genuine tenderness, dragging the sack out to the edge of the shore with difficulty. He continued dragging it towards the houses, leaving a broad scratch in the ground.

...The next day it began raining. Kosykh strode out of the house, looked at the sky, and was unpleasantly struck by its impenetrable grayness—it seemed to him that the

day should be blindingly sunny and joyous without fail. He caught a jet of rain water, thick and twisted as a rope, in his mouth, and spit it far out in front, accurately hitting a little puddle which had collected in a rut; then his thoughts wandered to grouse hunting. There's no hunting at all in such weather—the woodgrouse, chilled to the bone, sit under snags. In spite of the din, he seemed to hear the sounds of the sleepy, wet taiga not far off and he began feeling sorry for himself. Today he had to crawl into that gluttonous inferno, into the flame and heat of the gusher, to weld the flange—curse it three times over—and he suddenly felt like crying. He wiggled his nose and even sniffled. He recalled how he had killed birds and animals, shot them pitilessly with all kinds of weapons except a machine gun...

"My dears," he suddenly whispered, addressing all the birds and animals he had killed.

As though he were ashamed of his attack of pity, he rubbed his face with the cold rain water to calm himself. He wiped himself with his shirt sleeve and then, hiding from the rainfall under the overhanging roof, trudged under the awning to the truck. He pulled open the door, which stung drily from the cold, slipped behind the wheel, and in a flood of special, perhaps parting, tenderness, ran his palm over the steering wheel, rough with scratches, and touched the gear shift lever. He knew every last thing about the truck, every handle, pedal, button—the side glass, dented by an accidental blow of his rifle butt, and the rust-colored stain on the grooved rubber mat—woodgrouse blood, and the shattered glass of the speedometer—he had crushed it with his elbow while dealing with a jammed door,—everything was familiar... He sat silent for several seconds, feeling pity for his very essence welling up deep inside him, and then barely conscious, he got out from behind the wheel and rushed at a trot to the house. He realized that he was afraid of the gusher, afraid of the day's work.

He seated himself on the stool and stared at the swift, unkempt clouds raggedly flying above the roof of the house, and he calmed down little by little, came to his senses. He probably sat like that for about half an hour,

until Aunt Olya knocked at the door twice. She was amazed by his sad neatness, the concentrated gleam in his eyes, his meek, distracted pose.

"Ivan!" she called. "Hey, Ivan..."

Kosykh directed his gaze at Aunt Olya and bit his lip with his upper teeth. Seeing that the hero of the day had paid attention to her, Aunt Olya was encouraged.

"You ordered duck?" she sang out. "The ducks are ready. And the soup is ready... With Indian flavoring", she added, deciding to astonish Kosykh, "what a smell, and it's so tasty you'll swallow your tongue along with it."

Kosykh revived slightly; a golden spark quivered in his pupils, a rosy flush appeared on his cheekbones, and his strong, thick-winged nostrils flared, sensing Aunt Olya's tasty grub. But breakfast was the second thing on his agenda.

"Aunt Olya," he called. "Is the helicopter coming today?"

"How should I know?" she said in amazement.

"You know everything," Kosykh uttered with sad conviction.

"It doesn't seem to me to be flying weather. Sazakov and the chief have already spoken with the city to find out the forecast. In general, the city promised the helicopter would be here."

"But when?"

"I think when it stops raining—before that the helicopter won't show up."

She stood for a while, holding her hands under her apron and giving Kosykh a worried look, then sat down opposite him and called softly:

"Why don't we go have breakfast?"

But Kosykh wasn't listening—while looking out the window, he cheered up right before her eyes. His cheeks were no longer a light childish pink, but a healthy crimson. Aunt Olya also bent down to look out the window, astonished at the momentary transformation of the diesel operator; and saw that a transport helicopter of frightening size, its sloping sides powdered with smoke exhaust, was slowly turning its tail above the forest. Metal boxes covered with warnings were hanging on slings under its belly.

"They're bringing a new oil derrick," Aunt Olya summarized. "The end of the fire isn't in sight yet, but they're dropping off the derrick in good time. Fine!" she rejoiced noisily. Kosykh gave her a hostile look, and Aunt Olya caught his glance.

"It's time for breakfast," she uttered in a tone which didn't permit objections.

"Right away," Kosykh roused himself, "pour the soup into a cup, put your biggest spoon and a man-sized hunk of bread alongside, and I'll be along right away..."

Kosykh dashed to the passageway, lifted the sack stuffed with ducks by the tow-rope, and, leaving the door open, literally jumped out into the street. He jumped over the wall of pussy willow and went off at a trot, fearing that he would reach the bare patch where the Mi-6 was landing too late—they would unfasten the load and steal off, and he wouldn't have time to give them the package to bring to the city. A second wall followed the first—the edge of the taiga was framed by a double tier of pussy willow interspersed here and there with cedar underbrush. Kosykh scaled it as well, but tripped and rolled head over heels on the ground, raking the sand with his collar, trousers, and boots. He jumped up, and swearing and brushing himself off with his free hand while running, flew out to the bare patch, and realized at once that he had rushed for nothing. The Mi-6 was not about to take off—its propeller was slowing down, and some sacks, packages, parts wrapped in matting, and boxes shone brightly in the hold. The helicopter would be unloading for a minimum of an hour more.

Kosykh sidled up to the machine, not paying any attention to the warning cries of the flight mechanic—the angry fellow was afraid Kosykh would catch on a propeller vane. Then he cast a glance into the sloped glass cockpit, hoping to catch sight of a familiar face, but he couldn't make anything out—the cockpit was high up and the faces merged into a mass of pale specks. "You couldn't recognize your own mother here, much less some pilot that you know," Kosykh thought.

But now the vanes stopped and froze, bent towards the

ground like heavy stalks, and the flight mechanic jumped out of the hold and came up to Kosykh.

"Hey, mophead, are you tired of living, or something? If a vane hits you it'll take off half your noggin."

"Oh, this flying man really likes a laugh. He's still young, that's why," thought Kosykh unclenching his fist and letting go of the tow-rope, which had cut blood-red marks into his skin.

"Listen, friend, you'll bring this to the city, won't you?" he asked humbly.

"No, I won't... You can send packages by mail," the flight mechanic advised him, smiling.

"It's no laughing matter. My wife is sick and here I am... There's no way I can get to her."

"Then you shouldn't be an oil worker—you should sit in town."

"I have to weld the flange to the 'butt' today," Kosykh whined. "That's not like flying like a bird in the sky—it's heroism, a risky venture."

"You're going right into the fire?" the flight mechanic asked in disbelief, his curiosity aroused.

"Yes, right into the fire," Kosykh confirmed. Out of the corner of his eye he saw the forest cutting fill with oil workers, come to load the helicopter. Polikashin was pacing out in front, sharply swinging his arms, as if learning to march in formation. Polikashin was all he needed here. And seeing Kosykh, he made right for him.

"Still sending parcels to your wife?" his voice was fresh and loud as usual, as if he hadn't spent a sleepless night working, and there was no sign of fatigue in his face, no violet circles under his eyes or dark hollows under his cheekbones.

"He says he's going to be welding the flange today," the flight mechanic put in.

"Tha-at's true." Kosykh was even surprised by this unexpected support, and stared fixedly at the flight mechanic who, from Kosykh's hard, dilated pupils and strained neck, understood that this was no ordinary pathetic petitioner standing before him.

"Well," Kosykh said, "if you won't do it I'll ask the

commander, but I won't let you off—the earth is round, you know, and people meet from time to time.”

“All right,” the flight mechanic agreed, hesitating for appearance sake.

“What are you sending home?” Polikashin asked. “Maybe I'll send something too...”

“Dirty laundry and...” Kosykh poked the sack with the toe of his boot, “some trifles, and a couple of ducks that got singed yesterday...”

“And who should I give it to? Who'll come?” the flight mechanic asked.

“My mother-in-law, her name is Taisia Pavlovna. Or my wife—a real honey—but don't try to make a pass at her—she's called Nadka. I'll let them know it's coming on the radio transmitter and give them the helicopter number. They'll come to the pilot's *balok* at the helicopter field; you just unload the sack and leave it in the *balok*.

“All right”, said the flight mechanic. “And when the ducks start falling again, you put a couple aside for me. You don't have the only wife who likes duck meat...”

He climbed into the hold and threw the sack into the cockpit. Kosykh, relieved, trudged to the dining room for the cold duck soup with Indian flavoring, and went from there to the site.

The site, strangely enough, was dry in spite of the rain. Kosykh craned his neck to find out what was going on, and saw that the rain couldn't reach the ground—the flame was gulping it up.

A strapping man with grayish-blue hair was already standing at the site—Kosykh had heard that he was a bigwig. Major Sergovantsev was also there (he was a legendary figure, and Kosykh knew him), as well as the foreman Sazakov, Keda and Kolyshev, Vitka Yuriev, and some other fellows, apparently firemen from Tyumen—the whole taiga garrison was at the site.

The gray-haired man greeted Kosykh with a nod, and a smile touched his lips.

Kosykh, cringing with fear, went up to the box and automatically tested the electrodes, making sure the coating hadn't been scratched off, but they had been specially selected, all of equal quality... A new fiber mask with

dark blue glass lay on the box. A milk can was pressed into the sand alongside. He went up to the can, an enamelled mug decorated with a strange sharp-leaved flower on its lid, and scooped up some kvass. He stood and sipped the sourish brew and felt his palate freeze and his teeth ache, but he still drank it all up. He then took a second scoop, but knew he couldn't finish it off and put the full mug on the can.

Not far off a fireman, his legs spread wide apart in their clay-stained tarpaulin boots, waited with his hose, playing with the brilliantly polished brass nozzle. Kosykh understood that he was waiting for him, was about to wash him down, and he felt akin to a cosmonaut preparing for a take-off, when, before the start, everyone wants to do his bit, to help in some way. He nodded importantly and turned his back to the fireman, who washed him down, and Kosykh's tarpaulin jacket immediately became wooden and as crisp as a rusk—it seemed that if he made one false move it would start to crack... Kosykh turned frontwards, and the fireman ran a weak jet over him which began to tickle pleasantly under his shirt. The cold stream crawled behind his collar, cooling his shoulders and belly, and Kosykh giggled briefly and nervously.

The gray-haired man came up to him and said something, Kosykh saw his mouth open and his lips move noiselessly and, when he offered his hand, he understood that he was saying some words of encouragement. Kosykh, lingering a little longer, picked up the box with the electrodes and, covering his face with a mask, rushed towards the fire. And for a second it seemed to him that he must look like a large, intrepid bird on whom all eyes were now fixed.

In fact everyone at the site was looking at him at this moment, watching his clumsily agile, beetle-like figure, his work clothes blown out like a hump on his back, cover the fifty-meter strip in front of the torch. This strip, right at the approach, was the hottest place, where everything blazes from the unbearable heat—earth and stones, paint on the sides of bulldozers, clothing on people.

Kosykh moved forward by leaps. Right by the gusher the heat let up, it became easier to breath, and the feel-

ing that his heart was jumping out of his breast disappeared.

Near the mouth he caught his breath and threw his mittens on the ground... A flange had already been placed on the nozzle of the column, black and wet from oil—the boys had done that for him. A feeling of tender gratitude he had never experienced before, welled up and even his throat tightened. He looked around—yes, everyone was at the site—the gray-haired man was watching him, and the fearless major who looked like an actor, and absolutely everyone else—there were even women at the site. Probably Aunt Olya had come from the dining room. Then Kosykh looked upwards to where the orange mushroom, spotted here and there with black, had spread its cap with a howling crash, as if a bomb had fallen on the earth, except that the roar of the explosion was uninterrupted. The mushroom maliciously clapped with its edges, twisted about, and kept trying to jump down and clothe Kosykh in a fiery mantle. When Kosykh saw this his knees gave out—he squatted, craning his neck—and, crushed with terror, he kept examining this plague which was thirsting after him... He recalled the instructions which said that gas clouds gather around gushers and there are explosions from time to time—maybe right now, at this very instant, a gas pocket was thickening around him... If it burst, Kosykh would be scattered to bits, hanging from the cedar tops, boughs and branches. They say that a man gets thrown out of his clothes at the moment of an explosion—that means that his tarpaulin duds will still be heaped up on the ground when he's no longer around. Two tiny, stinging tears which burned like boiling water rolled down his cheeks and, joining at the grizzled crest of his chin, fell down into the sand. He twisted his head helplessly and saw that everyone was looking at him, and the attention of the others gave him a little courage. He had to weld the flange. He took out the electrode bar and, driving in into the jet of the welder, inadvertently touched the flange with it. The diamond splash of the arc dazzled his eyes, and Kosykh staggered back, leaving the quickly fading lump of melted metal on the flange. He tried to take himself in hand, but his swelling heart roared in protest,

signalling danger, and he, barely coping with his heart and the roar in his ears, stuck the electrode into the junction of the flange and the column "butt". The diamond splashes again began dancing before him, and Kosykh, covered by the mask, began to weld, barely seeing what he was welding and how he was welding. The mushroom—orange slightly tinged with black—froze before his eyes as if projected on a screen, and for some reason a rough wasted voice kept drumming three phrases into his ears over the din: "join seam," "brand seam," "whip seam"—and Kosykh methodically jerked his head, as if trying to shake these phrases out of his ears. His jacket quickly dried and he became hot; he felt as if he had been shoved into a furnace, and it seemed to him that his clothes and hair were about to burst into flame. Unexpectedly he touched the jet with his mask. Its fiber sides seemed sawed through, although they inexplicably held on to the handle; but half of the mask together with the glass was gone—the jet had cut it out like a knife. And Kosykh couldn't endure it—he began yelling for the whole taiga to hear, let go of the welder, and rose to his full height, no longer seeing how the electrode, burned onto the flange, was melting and the precious shining blue fire was splashing metal on his boots and sprinkling the ground around them. Kosykh jumped away from the gusher and turned cold when he realized that his legs were failing him: because of his wild fear they wouldn't support him. He crawled away from the gusher on all fours, buried up to his elbows in dry dust which was seething and crackling from the discharges, and groaned with pain—blisters had puffed up on his dust-scalded hands...

When he reached the people he fell on his chest to the ground, pressed his cheek against the cold side of the milk can, and wheezed:

"I can't... I can't do the welding... And you have no right to force me. There is no such right..."

Then he uttered the only reasonable thing that came into his head:

"You need a passport for this work. It's complicated work. I don't have a passport. No, I don't..."

Chertiuk left the site with his head bowed low, looking

down in the dumps, his hands thrust deep into his pockets. His steps were unsteady, as if he were crying—he was evidently upset by the other man's cowardice. Major Sergovantsev moved behind him, overtaking him with a light athletic gait.

At dinner there was deep silence—everyone was afraid to utter the first sentence. They all glanced at Kosykh, who had already managed to recover and was handling his bandaged hands quite deftly. He decided first that there was no reason for silence at the dinner table, and began speaking, not addressing anyone in particular:

"You have the feeling that the gusher is about to come crashing down on your head. When you look from below the fire is like a whole mushroom cap... And besides, a gas pocket was beginning to collect—I gave a sniff and formic acid hit my nostrils. I was afraid it would burst, especially since as a welder I'm good for nothing. I'm a diesel operator..."

"But the extra pay you get as a welder—it's good for something?" asked Zhimenko.

"Well... I usually work on trifles. It's not hard to manage. Look how I burned my hands."

"What do I care about your hands?" Zhimenko screwed up his eyes spitefully. "You gave the brigade a bad name. Your hands will heal tomorrow, but what about our reputation? Nothing can wipe it clear, not kerosene or gasoline... The label will just keep sticking."

"Let's hope not for long," Keda put in.

"Does crude oil really smell like formic acid?" asked Vitka Yuriev. He was a nice, a very nice boy, this recent schoolboy Vitka, and therefore he decided in a touching, naive way to change the subject of this unpleasant but essential conversation, which had to take place all the same. Kosykh welcomed Vitka's sincere participation and answered, looking straight into his eyes:

"You've never smelled it? When you do you feel like sneezing. As if an ant gushed into your nostrils. As soon as you smell it, your head starts to spin..."

"Why don't you keep quiet, know-it-all?... What a hero." Aunt Olya sat down on the free corner of the bench, mimicking him with her hands on her hips. "Duck soup. I

made soup for him, but he couldn't hold it in... Humph, 'a man-sized hunk of bread'," she snorted.

"Something new?" Zhimenko screwed up his eyes.

"Yeah, that one over there... It's his expression," the cook indicated Kosykh. The color drained from his face, and the blood vessels even protruded on his cheek bones. Vitka Yuriev saw this and once more meddled in the conversation in a touching, naive way, fearing at the same time that Zhimenko or Keda would cut him short again.

"They say oil is similar to black coffee, right? And watery like kerosene? It doesn't freeze, but it gets sticky in freezing weather..."

In a single breath Vitka machine-gunned everything he knew about oil, without commas and periods. Zhimenko even stopped eating and scrutinized Vitka Yuriev with interest, as if he were pre-historic fossil.

"I read that there's Cretaceous, Jurassic, Devonian, Carboniferous, and Cambrian oil. Cambrian is the oldest, has an extremely high octane rating, and is as clean as aviation fuel."

"Right," said Sazakov, who also found the conversation about Kosykh unpleasant, all the more so since he had interpreted the incident to the central board chief and the major—he had said that a kind of nervous shock had occurred, and they agreed. "On the Lena, in Markov, there's a Cambrian platform. The oil is light, like alcohol—they fill up motor boats with it and ride on the river."

"A regular popular science lecture," Zhimenko smiled, "all you need is a blackboard scribbled all over with chemical formulas. We began talking about Kosykh, and now we've talking about oil. Let's also say a few words about the sky, about kvass, black grouse, and bulldozers."

"Comrade Sazakov," Vitka Yuriev fired off as soon as Zhimenko caught his breath. "One of the bulldozers that was brought is standing idle. In school I specialized in tractor driving... Let me work a little on the bulldozer!"

Sazakov turned to him perplexedly and blinked his beady eyes, while Zhimenko unhurriedly licked his wooden spoon clean and, bending across the table, lightly flicked the top of Vitka's head.

"Sit still, moon face!"

The two K's gave a friendly laugh and looked at Sazakov.

"You're making a mistake," Vitka said in chagrin, "I could do it."

"Well, what are we going to do with Kosykh?" Zhimenko took up the old topic.

Everyone grew quiet, and an uncomfortable silence again reigned in the dining room. Keda moved his plate aside and, pondering something, turned to Polikashin. Kolyshev also tore himself from his food and followed his friend's gaze; Polikashin was the oldest one in the brigade and the fairest—everyone admitted it—and besides, he was the Party organizer. Zhimenko also saw where Keda was looking. Without getting up from the table, he stretched his plate over his shoulder and waved it back and forth.

"Aunt Olya, won't you pile on some of the main course?"

The cook heaped on potatoes, plopped on top two porous meat croquettes which tickled the nostrils with garlic, and, sprinkling this complex structure with onion, stuck the plate in Zhimenko's hand. He hoisted it to the table, then dug the tip of his knife into the pepper and shook it over the plate.

"Semenych, you're our party chief, what do you say?"

"Olga, give me some of the main course, too," Polikashin asked instead of responding, and, pondering, scraped his chin with his finger and looked at the drillers one by one. The brigade was waiting. "What do I sa-ay?" Polikashin drawled. "I think we should kick Kosykh out of the brigade. But that's only my personal opinion, so to speak."

"Why only yours?" Zhimenko asked. "It's mine too."

"And mine," Keda said suddenly. Wherever Keda was, there was Kolyshev—they didn't call them the "two K's" for nothing. Kolyshev, not saying a word, moved his shoulders in agreement.

Kosykh stopped eating and gave Polikashin a piercing look. Vitka Yuriev, who was sitting opposite the diesel operator, noted this fleeting glance and thought uneasily that a fight was in the air—although he was a coward, Kosykh was brutal, and Polikashin was already old.

"According to the rules a trade union meeting has to

be called to sack him," Vitka Yuriev said, "there should be a charge-sheet . . . a reason . . ."

"The reason is as clear as day," Polikashin responded. "He's light-fingered, negligent on the job, dirty, lacks initiative . . ."

"Dirty?" Vitka asked. "There is no such wording."

"There is so. A while ago he shoved a sack of burnt ducks into the helicopter and gave instructions to bring them to Nadka. He should have heard what the flyers said about him . . ."

"Still and all, there has to be a meeting," Vitka said with conviction.

"You're wrong, derrick rider," Zhimenko said. "It would be a meeting of all of us . . . And we're all here. So let's vote. Who's for?"

This was the first time in his life that Vitka had seen such a meeting, just as it was probably the first time that he had seen his elders deciding a man's fate harshly and inflexibly, not allowing the diesel operator either to come to his senses or get his bearings. He wanted to exclaim, to appeal to the workers—stop, men, he'll reform . . . But he suddenly understood by their faces that he had once been offered the chance to reform, but stayed the same, and now he could not be forgiven.

They voted. Nobody was against. Two abstained—Sazakov and Vitka Yuriev. All the others were for.

Kosykh stood up. He had become unrecognizable—his eyes had grown white, his strong straight shoulders sagged like a sack, his fingers were trembling, and their tips and nails were even covered with a violet tinge. Vitka had read somewhere that a man's fingertips and nails usually turn blue before he dies, and he was terrified—he pitied Kosykh.

Kosykh lingered near Polikashin, gave him a sharp look with his colorless eyes, and tenderly passed his palm across his back, as though removing a spider.

"Sometimes people's paths cross. It happens, doesn't it. Polikashin?"

"Go on, go on," Zhimenko advised him calmly and rapped the table with a dull thud. "If you touch Polikashin you'll have to deal with all of us. I don't recommend it . . ."

They sent for another welder, one with experience. The helicopter brought him the following morning, and Chertiuk was somewhat surprised to see a young fellow of about twenty dressed in a soldier's padded jacket—he had evidently been recently discharged from the army. But in spite of his youth the fellow knew his business and felt at home at the gusher. The only phrase they heard from him was:

"A regular dragon—it roars and everything..."

And that was all. He set out for the gusher—not at a run or at high speed, but at a normal pace; only he kept screening his face from the fire with his mitten, protected his nose so it wouldn't get burnt. At the gusher he neatly laid out his uncomplicated ammunition—bars, a spare shield—and began to weld—prosaically, without hurrying, as if he were giving a simple classroom demonstration. His hands didn't shake and his mask didn't slip into the jet. Sometimes he stood up and unhurriedly circled the gusher, and at such moments he looked like a gardener circling a harmful tree, estimating the most convenient approach. Only once, when he was baked through and through—in any case, so it seemed from the site—he stood up, unfastened the strap of his tank helmet, moved it onto his crown, and wiped himself with the flap of his tarpaulin jacket, probably annoyed that he had forgotten to grab his handkerchief. He didn't tell anyone what he had been thinking during those moments at the oil jet. And they did badger him, after all, both at the dinner table and at night, when they were already in the *balok* and everyone's bodies were tingling all over from fatigue, and they wanted sleep more than life itself—but the fellow brushed it all aside. He brushed off one particularly tiresome derrick fitter:

"Why do you keep saying hero and hero?.. Are you envious of me, or something? I don't get it. Be proud, but never be envious." And he added, regretting something known to him alone: "I'm not the one who said that. The famous composer. Scriabin said it."

One more day was spent in minor preparations. By evening nobody talked about Ivan Kosykh—he was forgotten. They spoke about various things at the table: about

the moon research vehicle, about politics, only not about the gusher or about Kosykh.

Then Chertiuk arrived and asked Aunt Olya for some coffee—she strained some liquid, as thick as sour cream, into a mug and drowned a pat of butter in it, which made the coffee richer and thinner, and very pleasant to drink.

Chertiuk took a sip, and it was as though his face had been dusted off; his cheeks, the hollows under them, and his chin brightened—the man looked younger. He held the mug in both hands.

“Tomorrow we’ll place the preventor,” Chertiuk said, as if not addressing anyone, but thinking aloud. “The gusher is awfully violent. Every day twelve million cubic meters down the drain, and that’s no more and no less than Moscow’s average consumption. Explosions have occurred five times in this country while placing a preventor on a flange... Nobody knows why. Could this be the sixth?”

Chertiuk drank his coffee and left, preoccupied, but his words stayed behind and hung in the air. Those in the dining room seemed to be stuck to their seats—their eyes filled with alarm, and they all became thoughtful. Then they silently sorted out their caps, hard hats, and tank helmets and dispersed.

In the morning, in the gray twilight covered with rippling mist, they struck the gusher with “mortars”: the water splashed with such force from the stubby barrels that when they inadvertently hit the edge of the forest, they instantly knocked over several cedars—only their roots, like legs, flashed in the air. The long, supple strands wound into the flame, cutting it into several ragged pieces, as if tearing a gigantic flag into strips; the bass of the gusher howled with indignation and the earth shook. The fire resisted the water for about ten minutes, then tore away from it and, flat, twisting, and terrible, howling like an airplane, it described a semicircle over the heads of the people, who dropped on all fours, and rushed to the taiga. There was trembling underfoot when, weary, the fire pressed its breast against the earth and the gusher crashed free, kicking right up to the clouds.

“Aha, it’s cleared about fifty meters,” Chertiuk noted,

and felt his forehead begin to sweat under the low-hanging, wrong-sized hard hat. Not restraining himself, he became angry, although he knew that at such moments he should be his most composed and cautious. Waiting for the right moment, he waved the red flag in command—it's time!—and twitched his nostrils, catching a whiff of formic acid: the gas had come and was beginning to roam over their heads. He looked hopefully towards the houses—wind, how they needed wind!—as though the wind were hiding behind those log boxes racked by rain and dry heat. But he understood from the thin thread-like column soaring up to the clouds and from the timid mournful calm, that no wind could be expected for the next three hours. He grew pinched and even sunken, shifted his gaze to the winches, to the people milling about in preparation, to the caterpillar crane moving up to the gusher in worm-like spurts, its whole body pushing the bulky, brilliantly carmine hulk of the preventor, hanging from a hook and looking incongruously festive amidst the stern gray guise of nature, the gray oil, the gray figures of people.

Something was squeezing his chest, preventing him from breathing. It was a good thing, at least, that his shoulder had stopped bothering him lately—at difficult moments, when his nerves were strained to the breaking point, his wound would always subside. He suddenly recalled Vasilich's request that he look after his grandson—his name is Viktor, it seems... Yes, that was the name the foreman gave... He again cast his eyes on the group of people surrounding the right winch nearby, then shifted his gaze to the ones straddling the right one in the distance. He looked at the crane—it was just as stubbornly, but still just as timidly, pushing the preventor forward, and he impatiently drummed his fingers on the buttons of his work clothes, as though on the buttons of an accordion. Not only Chertiuk, but everybody at the site and by the winches was overcome by anxiety.

But anxiety was alien to Vitka Yuriev, about whom Chertiuk had just been thinking—he was standing by the second winch, which was driven into fragrant, stickily wet young cedar shrubs. He found several swollen, extremely large blueberries, and was as delighted as if he had never

eaten them before—the blueberries were as sweet as some noble variety of grape. Isn't that the reason why the blueberry is commonly called the Siberian grape? Then he stared hard into somebody's eyes: a large old pine grosbeak, rocking on a birch branch and holding on to it so tightly that the bends of its crimson claws whitened, was looking at him sadly. The splendid gaudiness of his plumage was not at all in keeping with the human sadness of his gaze. This bird is prophetic and rare—not everyone has the good luck to see one. Vitka wanted to shout: "Look, a pine grosbeak!", but he recalled that the fellows nearby were not from their brigade, but were derrick fitters he didn't know at all—strangers, burly, shoulders a kilometer wide... They wouldn't understand his joyous howl. It appeared that Vitka, spreading his arms wide, wanted to embrace the pine grosbeak together with all birds and animals, and took a step forward. He had barely taken a pace when the grosbeak's gaze grew stern and darkened, he opened his hooked beak as if he wanted to start talking, and, bristling his feathers, fell into the blueberry patch.

Vitka rushed up to him and took him in his hands, but the pine grosbeak was already dead. And Vitka regretted that mankind had not yet invented the water of life, capable of returning people, animals, birds—all creatures who breathe and whose hearts beat in their breasts—to this beautiful world.

He put the grosbeak under the cedar and again took his stand by the winch. He thought that the prophetic pine grosbeak was too old and fearless, if he dared to die before people's eyes—evidently even a bird knows that it's easier to die among people.

Moving apart the cedar shrubs, Sazakov approached, not having slept his fill, his face heavy.

He stood silent near Vitka for a second, then moved his lips: he was talking, but Vitka couldn't make out anything.

"How are you, kid?" Vitka finally made out. He smiled.

"You smile from ear to ear, kid," Sazakov said.

"It's not my fault—that's the way my mama made me," Vitka answered.

Sazakov slapped him on the shoulder and again cut his way through the cedar shrubs.

Meanwhile the crane had already moved the preventor into the jet, the preventor entering it like a knife into butter. Splashes scattered about the site, as if hail were running along it, raising the dust. Then Chertiuk waved the red flag, and the crane operator, turning away from the jet, began to lower the preventor onto the flange centimeter by centimeter, millimeter by millimeter. Two derrick fitters together, grabbing the handle of the winch, strained so hard that their faces became wine red, and they turned the wheel. The cable squeaked, crackled with electricity, but it hauled properly.

Thus the preventor crawled downwards; the derrick fitters replaced one another, and Vitka also had a chance to hold on to the handle and turn. Sweating, he revolved the wheel until he was pushed away—not painfully or insultingly—by a strapping and suntanned replacement, who looked as if he had just arrived from the south. Vitka tore himself from the wheel, and his palms felt the frost after the hot wooden handle.

When the preventor was almost right on top of the flange, only one or two handbreadths of clearance remaining—the clearance was so minute that it couldn't even be seen from the side, and Vitka considered the preventor already placed and that only the nuts had to be turned—a fiery volcano suddenly flew up into the sky, and the boom again made the earth tremble under their feet. The fire engulfed the crane and the man sitting in it, and everybody at the site stood petrified as they saw the crane operator jump out. The wings of the flame, fanned by the wind, flickered behind his back. The crane operator bounded in immense leaps to the edge of the forest, to the sparse trunks of the firs and young cedars—to where the Trom-Aganka was flowing. A stream of water lashed in pursuit—the fireman, bewildered at first, came to his senses; then another watery strand splashed like a flare from the other end. The jets crossed, knocking the crane operator off his feet, the flame abated, and it even seemed to the benumbed Vitka that a cloud of steam shot up from the man lying on his back. Vitka's replacement, standing next to him, bent over

and wiped his eyes and forehead in relief with the flap of his jacket.

Then Vitka saw that the crane had caught fire, the fire was dancing in the tarpaulin cab, and the cable from which the preventor was dangling was scorching hot, already turning crimson—any minute and it would burn through like a thread. Then the preventor would crash into the flame, which meant that the fire would rage for another two weeks, shake up the taiga with its din, spit out stinking black flakes, dirty the earth around it. Besides, this was their only crane, and it would be a long time before they got another one . . .

All this whirled confused in Vitka's head, one thought collided with another. He unexpectedly recalled his recent conversation in the dining room, when he had said that he would like to drive a bulldozer—after all, he does have a tractor driver's licence—and Sazakov, sitting next to him, glanced at him in disbelief and probably smiled to himself, and even the pale, shaken Kosykh turned his lackluster eyes to him for a second.

Vitka, snapping out of his momentary torpor, separated the backs of the derrick fitters standing in front of him, dashed forward, and began measuring off the site with his long, elastic stride, as if remembering his success in running at school—in his last year he had been a good long-distance runner.

. . . Chertiuk saw a long-legged figure break away from the distant site to the right, and for the first moment didn't even understand what it wanted to do. Then he screamed desperately, realizing, all the same, that the man wouldn't hear his voice.

"Where are you going? To hell with the crane! You'll burn up!" Chertiuk knew very well that drillers and derrick fitters were standing by the winch at the moment, people who knew nothing about operating a crane. None of them—and Chertiuk considered this indisputable—had ever had anything to do with cranes, much less caterpillar cranes. There was no way to help this madman—at any second a fuel tank might explode.

Vitka was kicking up a wave of dust with his boots. He wasn't thinking that he might blow up together with

the crane, but was only wondering why the crane was kicking, twitching, bobbing up and down, dancing from side to side. While running he also noted that the fire had stopped gobbling up the roof of the crane, and had fallen through into the cab. Vitka's main goal was to reach the crane right away. Faster, faster, faster!

Vitka felt that his mouth was burnt—his caked, hardened lips cracked, and blood flowed in a seething stream down his chin on to his neck and behind his collar. He grasped the handrail of the cab with his hands and screamed out in pain—his skin stuck to the hot metal and the pain ran through his body like a current, from head to toe. He leaped over the caterpillar and lowered himself with a sweep onto the seat, which dully rumbled from the fire, noting subconsciously that the heat wouldn't be fatal to his tarpaulin pants—they wouldn't melt in a hurry... To shield himself from the fire, he drew the jacket over his ears and then pulled it over his head, leaving just a chink for his eyes, to look into the flame. It seemed to him that the winch cables were hanging down, and he thought gratefully—"good for you boys, you thought of the cables!"—not noticing that they were sagging because they had heated up, and that the men standing by the winches wouldn't have had the time to unwind the drums so fast.

"Is the motor working or isn't it? It's shaking sure enough, but there's something I don't understand..."

He pushed the accelerator with a jerk and felt a slight shaking, which caused a ticklish sensation in his feet—the engine didn't die away, it was working.

"Now I have to release the brake and go into reverse... But where in the world is the reverse, where? Damn it! I forgot! Aha... Here it is!"

Vitka rumbled the gearshift and increased the gas; the crane started up with a jerk, backed up, and the bulky, smoky body of the preventor crawled out of the flame. Making a deep furrow on the ground, it followed behind, but the fire began to splash into the windows of the cab.

As if on a screen, everyone saw the awkwardly stooped body of Vitka Yuriev against the bright background of the flame, which painfully smarted their eyes.

A belated "mortar" struck at half strength; it smashed the back window of the cab to smithereens, and soaked Vitka in water from head to foot, bringing him relief for an instant. But only for an instant—Vitka Yuriev didn't even have a chance to get scared about his impending reprimand when he saw that the overturned winches were dragging on the cables following behind the preventor, and proud satisfaction arose in his breast—he had saved the preventor, which was worth no more and no less than several thousand, and they would certainly shut the throat of the gusher with this preventor—when suddenly a strange hissing and whistling resounded from behind and Vitka was flung with a terrible force out of the cab onto the ground, and a whole sea of burning solar oil splashed out on top of him. He lay on his back in an immense blazing puddle, and noted in amazement that the flame was licking his clothes and himself, that his hands were burning, and several powerful water jets were spraying the puddle with all their might, trying to tear the fire away from the solar oil. But it had already seeped into the ground and was feeding the fire as a wick feeds a lamp—there was no way to gnaw it away.

When he came to, the first thing Vitka saw was the white ceiling above him, and he vaguely imagined that he was in a hospital—he couldn't die, they had to get him alive to a hospital without fail—and there? There doctors raise the dead from their graves.

There was one other sign of a hospital—the silence. At the gusher his head hurt and shook so much from the din that his teeth were jumping out, but here it was quiet, a real hospital calm. He saw a face above him, old, furrowed all over with wrinkles, a very familiar face—but whose? Vitka couldn't recognize it right away because the face was clouded immediately with a dull whitish film.

Vasilich, noisily swallowing his saliva, peered at the unfamiliar black face again and again.

Vitka stirred his scorched eyelids and only now recognized his grandfather—only he had changed so much. Had he gotten sick?

"Grandpa, is that you?"

"Uhuh," his grandfather responded.

"Am I in a hospital?" Vitka asked.

"No," grandfather began shaking his head. "We're at the gusher..."

"But why is it so quiet?"

"Why, they knocked down the gusher. On the same day that it tore loose and you dragged out the preventor... They threw the preventor on a second time and rammed it in like a gag..."

"Good," said Vitka and sighed deeply, "and I wanted to ask to drive the bulldozer, I thought there would be a lot of work. What do you think, would they give me the bulldozer, huh? I have a tractor's driver's license..."

"Not just a bulldozer—they gave you a decoration," his grandfather told him in a whisper. "A decoration... And I was told that they named the oil field after you. Yuriev. The Yuriev Oil Field, that'll be its official name."

"Well," said Vitka in disbelief, then asked, speaking rapidly and tripping over the words: "You won't tell mother, will you?"

"About what?" his grandfather didn't understand.

"Well... That I got burned... I'll rest up and get all better... The main thing is that she shouldn't know. Mother will be upset—she has a weak heart."

Grandfather nodded in agreement.

"I want to sleep," said Vitka, "how I want to sleep! You go, I'll get on alone..."

"All right." Vasilich got up, butting the air with his head. Running his hands over the wall logs, he groped his way to the exit and once on the street swallowed the fresh air.

After standing there for a moment, he set out unsteadily for the gusher, silent and oblivious to his surroundings—his Adam's apple ran up and down in his throat from his gulping down his saliva. He stopped by the gusher and watched the oil splash out of the two branch pipes and, when he inadvertently bent down, he suddenly made out an oval oil puddle under his feet. The oil had clotted in a thin chemical crust, on which large grains of sand were stuck.

Vasilich bent down and scratched off the crust with his finger, and uncovered the darkly glistening, already thickened liquid underneath. He scooped up a handful, looked, and saw himself, his unshaven old face with its wrinkles, and his eyes, in whose corners weak tears were welling. He sighed and said, examining the black, aromatic pool enclosed in his palms:

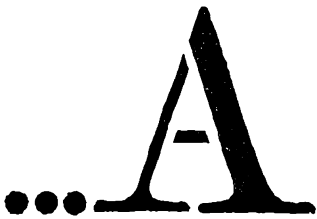
“Vitka’s oil . . .”

BORIS MASHUK was born in 1937 at a small Far Eastern railway station. In 1942 he lost both his parents. He went to a boarding school and then studied at a technical college in Khabarovsk to become a turner. He was sailor and stoker at the Amur steamship line. When serving in the army, he was a radio operator. He also worked as a fitter and later became a correspondent for many newspapers in the Amur and Magadan regions.

His first story, "Road Into Mystery", was put out in 1969. His long story, *A Hard Night on the Railroad*, about the builders of the Baikal-Amur Railway, won him the Leninist Komsomol prize for 1977.

Boris Mashuk

A HARD NIGHT on the RAILROAD



After dinner Liutov returned from the railroad line chilled through and through. And there was good reason: by November the cold was so crushing that even the sun seemed frightened. It didn't climb high, but hanging to the side of the settlement, quickly went behind the peaks of the frozen hills. The snow crunched more noisily underfoot, ice broke with short moans on the wasteland puddles.

His warm boots had grown stiff, and Liutov turned towards home to change his boots without dropping by at the office.

He occupied one of the three rooms in half of a two-apartment house. He had yielded the larger part to a veteran of the roads, the bulldozer operator Egorov. Egorov had come here with his old woman, but since spring his son and daughter-in-law had done the old folks the favor of leaving Alenka and Natashka, aged six and seven, with them. Large-eyed, snub-nosed like their grandma, the girls were smart, quick-tempered, always at odds with seven-

year-old Andrei, who lived in the other half of the house, beyond the wall.

This time too Liutov had barely entered the gate when Andrei, wrapped up in a fur coat drawn in at the waist by a belt, ran up to him.

"Uncle Pavel, Uncle!" Andrei told him. "Egorov's kids just fight all the time!"

Egorov's kids were hiding behind the porch. They considered Liutov one of them, and therefore came out from their cover without fear.

"Don't you pick a fight, don't!" squealed Natashka standing behind Liutov's legs.

Andrei angrily dug the snow with the toe of his felt boot and scowled at Liutov.

"Can I beat them up?"

The little girls almost jumped up and down from the boldness of their foe. With a sharp sigh Alenka fired off:

"Go choke yourself!"

"Now, now, comrade builders," Liutov said slowly, surveying the quarreling roly-polies from on high. "You have a lot of strength and you have to use it." He frowned sternly and ordered: "Get ready!"

Craning their necks, the kids stared with guarded curiosity.

"But... what for?" Natashka couldn't stand it.

"I'm sending you to lay rails!"

The children knew that Uncle Pavel was a big boss in the settlement, and now, after these words, they looked at one another in fright.

"But we're still little," Natashka explained, looking down.

"That doesn't matter... We can find the right size crow-bars for you."

"I'm not going," Andrei refused flatly. "Mama is baking pies..."

"Ha!" Alenka hastened. "We're having pies too, we are too!"

"Then here is what you should do," Liutov said seriously. "As soon as you finish with the pies go right to the road... Unless you make up, of course. Understand?"

"Uhuh," Natashka sighed.

"But tell them to give me the sled," Andrei said stubbornly.

"Since everybody is going to have pies, everybody should have the sled too," Liutov judged sternly, going towards the porch. "And you run along home . . . Your noses will get frost-bitten."

Warmth and the smell of good cooking greeted him inside the apartment. When the door knocked Prokopievna looked out from the kitchen. She was a large woman, her arms bared to the elbow, who was acquainted with the axe, the crow-bar, the spade and the trowel . . . Anyone who knocks about construction sites all her life can't help but know them.

Prokopievna tucked a lock which had come loose under her kerchief and smiled.

"You've come just in time, Pavel Zakharych. My pies are done."

"I just dropped in for a minute," Liutov responded, throwing off his sheepskin coat by the door. "There's no time . . ."

"You save your 'no time' for when you're sick, and eat when you should," Prokopievna began telling him off, returning to the stove where something was crackling. "My man also went off to his rattling machine. Said he would be there till late . . . What, are they laying tracks?"

"Yes."

"Well, it won't take you long to gulp down a cup of tea . . . And just look at the pies I baked! There are some with mushrooms, and some with fish . . . Three days ago salted humpback salmon was on sale here. But you don't know about such things. You've got other things to think about besides salmon . . . So I soaked it and mixed it with rice, and just see what a tasty filling it made . . ."

Liutov listened to Prokopievna through the door, which opened into his bachelor's room. A bed and stool, borrowed temporarily from the head of the dormitory, and a polished table, bought by chance—that was all the furniture. The table didn't seem to go with the dilapidated stool. It was meant to be shown off in a comfortable apartment, to reflect flowers and crystal. But here it had to put up with a pile of books, handbooks, packs of cigarettes, soap, rolls

of blueprints, loose candy, a bag of spice cookies, a mug with unfinished tea—all heaped on top of it. Prokopievna was offended. Liutov did not allow her to straighten out the table: it was easier for him to find what he needed in the mess.

While listening to his neighbor, Liutov threw off his boots with a grunt and found high boots covered with black fur under the bed. Pulling them on and feeling their coziness and warmth, he pushed a pack of cigarettes into his jacket pocket and headed for the door. But Prokopievna wasn't dozing either.

"No, no, Pavel Zakharych. Everything is on the table already!"

He had to turn to the kitchen. Liutov tossed about five little pies in his mouth and washed them down with tea. Seeing that his neighbor was moving an immense piece of fish pie his way, he waved his hands.

"Later, Prokopievna . . . I'll find my way back to your goodies!"

"Oh, this is impossible!" the old woman sighed maternally. "You'll spend your whole life like this. And your scarf, don't forget your scarf! In the morning you went without it." Watching Liutov fumble with the buttons and buttonholes of his sheepskin coat, she asked, "Did you see my bandits?"

"They're here, in the yard. Battling with Andrei!"

"Even the frost doesn't scare the little devils . . . But it's time to drive them in."

"They won't freeze," Liutov smiled, opening the door. "They'll grow up strong . . ."

When he went out on the porch, he saw that there was a temporary truce among the children. Pulling the rope taut, Andrei dragged the sled on which crafty Natashka was enthroned, while Alenka conscientiously nudged the sled from behind. The kids' thin voices piped imitating either a car or a diesel locomotive, which now often went past near their house.

...While striding towards the outskirts of the village, Liutov heard the rumble of a motor and, lifting his head, saw a helicopter flash behind the tops of nearby trees. Liutov's face, recently cheerful, became worried. "The

mail has gone," he noted. "The pilot was detained for some reason. It'll soon be dark, time for him to be at the base. Did he take the correspondent?"

Liutov recalled the young pushy correspondent with a beard which he had apparently grown to look more imposing, but which stuck out comically between the lapels of his collar which was always raised. For several days the correspondent wore out the administrators with his "tell me," "what do you think," "and how is that done?" and, when he began getting ready to go home, everyone was prepared to send him packing on the first occasion. But today there was no hope of sending him off by car and Liutov had sent the journalist to the helicopter pilot who brought the mail, packages, and boxes of motion picture films.

When he had reached the foot of the slope at the outskirts of the settlement, a column of heavy trucks made Liutov step off the edge of the road. They came from the direction of the station and their trailers were carrying small railroad cars, excavators, iron-concrete pipes, bulldozers, sacks of cement, bricks, a compressor, an electric power station, a wooden squared beam, boards, boxes of groceries. "A new mechanized column is being deployed somewhere, it seems," Liutov noted with satisfaction: it was his people who had laid the rails as far as the station, and now freight trains were coming here.

Formerly, at the very beginning of the construction, everything had to be trucked in to scattered settlement such as this, which had sprung up in isolated places, and even to Tynda, the capital of the district. Roads in the taiga are difficult. They extend through long passes, on steep ascents, dodge the hill slopes. And oh, how expensive it was to transport work clothes and fresh tomatoes, potatoes and sheepskin coats, notebooks for the kids, an instrument and spare parts—everything that people need. How many cars turned over and were crippled! Whatever others might think, Liutov already knew how valuable every kilometer of road is here.

Crunching on the snow and hiding his face from the head wind, he turned off the road towards a green mobile home standing on wooden blocks. From the outside the

quarters seemed abandoned, but inside it was warm, wood was crackling in a stove made from an iron barrel—evidently one of the fitters had recently stuffed it. Right by the entrance benches stood, dirtied by rough clothing, and by the far wall there was a dilapidated table. Above it two sheets of white Whatman paper were fastened to the wall with large nails. One was a drawing of a fitter. Arm extended, he asked sternly: "Do you remember that on November 7 we should be at the 103rd kilometer?" From the other sheet an extra informed them: "The tracklaying record is 1,600 meters per shift. Can we do more?"

Walking through the room, Liutov stopped above the stove, lit a cigarette, and, frowning, became lost in thought. People would gather here in a few minutes. On this holiday eve they would have to go to the railroad. And they had to do the almost impossible. Perhaps because such exceptional circumstances did not arise on the train every month, Liutov wanted to talk with the men before the shift. He understood that the brigade was expecting cheerful, strong, special words from him, and he feared that he wouldn't be able to find them.

Hurried steps creaked behind the thin wall and Buryanov, dressed warmly and well for work, pushed his way through the door. The foreman was short, bow-legged, with narrow shoulders, but for his forty years he was youthfully agile and strong, and his face, round and ruddy, revealed a merry, quick-tempered nature. Even before becoming the train chief, while working in the production department of the construction office, Liutov had managed to get to know Buryanov. And he knew that he would work himself and others to the bone, but would get the job done.

Buryanov clapped his mittens, which he had taken off by the door, and, approaching Liutov, screwed up his eyes slyly.

"Have you come to exhort us?"

Turning his head, Liutov stared fixedly at the foreman and, after a pause, answered in a muffled tone:

"To give my blessing."

Buryanov puffed at a cigarette, spit out a shred of tobacco, and asked:

"How's the road, Zakharych?"

"An hour before the shift ended they were laying the eighth picket of the hundredth."

The foreman lowered his head, studying the toes of his felt boots, fell silent, pondering, and then sighed.

"We have more than two kilometers left to do?"

"Will you stick it out?"

"We'll have to, it only depends on how things go, I hope a blizzard doesn't break out."

"There won't be a blizzard," Liutov remarked. "The wind is calm and there's a hard frost."

"When I was leaving I also took a look at the thermometer. For now its holding about thirty below, but at night, just wait, it'll go down to forty..."

The door opened abruptly, the cold air streamed over the threshold like a white billow, and strapping fellows burst into the car one after the other: Korzinkin, Gorikhvatko, Tsitnadze. They came in talking merrily and laughing at something, but, catching sight of the chief of the construction train, they grew quiet. Some took seats on the bench, others leaned their shoulders against the wall.

These were skilled fitters, the nucleus of Buryanov's crew. After the foreman, the first to sign up for the crew was Korzinkin who had conspicuous flaming-red side whiskers: it was not in Korzinkin's nature to lag behind the latest fashion... He arrived at the construction site before the others, when the train was just beginning to be organized. He did odd jobs, waiting for the track laying—the most important stage of the work—to begin. And as soon as talk arose about a fitters' crew, Korzinkin urged the personnel department.

"I belong on the line," he argued, "because railroad work runs in the family. If you must know, before the war my uncle's cousin was already keeping himself warm along the rails. How can I stay away from laying the track?"

Liutov went over to the table... The room was becoming quite crowded. More and more people kept dropping in. Heavily dressed, looking somewhat overweight in their jackets and quilted jackets, they were wearing fur-covered or felt boots. There were very young fellows, and "old fogies" of twenty five and even thirty. They cursed the weather and laughed softly under the silent gaze of the chief.

Standing far into the room, Liutov looked at the boys from time to time. There was Tsitnadze, standing next to Korzinkin . . . The Georgian was tall and slender. Unlike Korzinkin, he was silent and thoughtful.

They were hesitant to send the fellow to the fitters' crew, which always worked out in the open. He sensed this, and his face grew still darker.

"Don't worry, chief, don't worry so much . . . I'm not afraid of the frost, I'm not afraid of the midges. We can do everything we have to . . . Everything!"

Gorikhvatko, a stocky, long-armed young Ukrainian, was sitting not far from the Georgian. He appeared on the road with a brand-new graduation certificate. As a stonemason, he was assigned to work on housing. He didn't ask for anything else, but once he saw a track laying machine—huge miracle for a country lad. "A beautiful machine!" Gorikhvatko judged, having watched it work for a while. "Can you imagine! It takes a whole staircase of ties and rails, puts them down and rolls over them right then and there . . . It's an elephant, not a machine!"

Gorikhvatko's peaceful life ended. He could no longer build houses when he knew that close by fellows just like him were doing the most important thing: laying a steel road which, it seemed to him, had neither beginning nor end.

Gorikhvatko was naturally good-natured and easy going; people often played tricks on him, to which he reacted with naive surprise, like a child. Only when they pestered him to death did his immense fists stir, and he asked:

"When is the last time you saw the doctor?"

And then the crew's Komsomol organizer Sotov appeared.

Gorikhvatko, Korzinkin, and Sotov could always be seen together. If one of them appeared alone somewhere, you could expect the other two to show up. And so it was now—as soon as Sotov entered the car, Korzinkin pushed Gorikhvatko over on the bench to make room for his friend, and began smiling.

"That's what it means to be married, pals! His beloved has arrived, and our comrade is late already!"

"A wife is good!" Tsitnadze objected.

"Did I say it was bad?" Korzinkin was astonished. "It's

bad when a man loses touch with his friends for such a long time."

Glancing at Liutov, Sotov socked Korzinkin in the side and sat next to him, lowering his flaming scarlet face. As if waiting for this, smiles spread across the boys' weather-beaten, rough faces, and probably only his mood and the circumstances prevented Liutov from smiling. He also knew that this strapping, swarthy fitter of twenty-three could become as embarrassed as an adolescent.

Sotov had come to the construction site quite late. He didn't come alone, but with about fifty boys and girls from Bryansk, who also dreamed about the taiga and life in tents, about their first forest cutting in the deserted wilderness. But they put the newcomers up in a dormitory in the center of the settlement of two thousand people, and they had to build dwelling houses and a kindergarten. It was Sotov's lot to hollow out a foundation pit in the permafrost for a boiler-house. Korzinkin lured Sotov to the track laying. It was a good thing that talk had begun about strengthening the brigade.

Imperceptibly Sotov made himself at home among the fitters, and, although he didn't seem to stand out in any way, it was he who was chosen Komsomol organizer. At first this surprised Liutov. He even thought that perhaps the boys had been in too much a hurry, and that the principle "anybody but me" was at work in the election, but soon everyone felt that, aside from the crew leader, there was another force in the group. In September, when interruptions in the supply of rails threatened the track laying schedule, at the suggestion of the Komsomol members, the crew was restructured into two shifts. And a month ago, following its example, intensified effort was begun on all divisions of the train.

The driver from the construction site squeezed into the room. He was about to open his mouth to hurry the crew, but saw the train chief, and pressed against the wall behind the backs of the fitters. Liutov, noticing the driver, frowned still more and, looking at all of them, said with a sad smile:

"Happy holiday, comrades..."

The crew began to stir... Korzinkin sniffed, intending to say something, but Liutov stopped him.

"Only we'll celebrate later. After we do our job. As you know, the situation is complex. Our task is the following: by hook or by crook we have to be at the hundred and third kilometer tomorrow. You know about that too."

An elderly fitter in a new officer's cap squatted with his back to the stove. Inhaling the smoke of his home-made cigarette, he asked softly:

"How much is left for us to do?"

"Two thousand or more," Buryanov answered.

The crew was silent, pondering. Korzinkin, glancing at the extra on the wall, smirked:

"Nobody yet has made such a spurt. We're heading for a record!"

The elderly fitter, narrowing his eyes and grinning at Sotov, remarked:

"You'll forget about your wife after that!"

"And what do you need her for on the holiday?" Gorikhvatko was astonished. "You were always merry on the holiday without her."

"Just wait, just wait, young fellow," poking his cigarette butt into his felt boot, the elderly fitter tried to put him in his place. "You'll celebrate the night on the rails—then you'll hum a different tune."

"Ah, but we'll all be together... The whole crowd!"

Buryanov came out to the middle of the floor and, spreading his bow legs wide, looked around sharply at everyone.

"I think, lads, that the situation has been made clear. A holiday is good when work is done and nothing weighs on your mind. But we're not going to the road today on account of a record. We're being watched from many places. And everyone expects us to bring the road to the hundred and third kilometer. We have nowhere to hide, as they say, and there's no reason for us to funk out. And when you come right down to it, you yourselves broke your back for the right to lay these kilometers."

"It's not a question of whether we want to or not, foreman," said the Komsomol organizer, smiling slyly and looking around at his comrades. "Can we do it—that's the question!"

"Why are you talking like that?" Tsitnadze asked excitedly.

"Not so fast, kid,' the elderly fitter spoke up again. "Now if the rotator doesn't get to us the machine will break..."

"There won't be any 'if's,' Liutov said sharply. "I guarantee it!"

Gorikhvatko, turning to each of the speakers, shrugged his shoulders in confusion and then hit his knee with his fist.

"Why, what are we blathering about? We've got to get the kilometers done. And talking won't help..."

And he got up first, his cap touching the ceiling. Standing up next to him, Korzinkin declared:

"Grishukha has a real head on his shoulders... Let's go and get some air, friend, or else your clear brains will turn sour." His eyes hit on the driver. "Are we going to get rolling under the open sky again?"

Without answering, the driver began hurrying towards the door, but Liutov stopped him.

"If your truck isn't equipped with a hood on the first working day after the holiday, you'll be hacking the earth, understand?"

The driver nodded, gave Korzinkin an angry glance, and scurried out the door.

The brigade took seats in the truck, and a ragged awning fluttered over their heads. Not far from the last houses two men in dark, greasy work clothes were weaving their way towards the settlement. Supporting one another, they drawled dolefully: "I love you so, I'm set to go around the world for you..."

The driver, who wanted to get out of sight of the chief as fast as he could, stepped on the gas to hurry up the foreman. He got up on the foot board of the truck.

"If anything happens, Buryanov, if there are any troubles, let me know immediately," Liutov instructed him. "At the first opportunity. I'll come a little later: I'll have a word with him and come to you..."

"Got it." With both hands Buryanov pulled his cap on more securely. "The wind is coming on stronger, may it go to hell..."

The down-stream wind, as if trying out its strength, was blowing irregularly, pausing for breath, but each gust swooped down more strongly, sharply freezing cheeks and

squeezing out tears. Covering his face with the collar of his sheepskin coat, Liutov stood by the mobile home, his gaze following the truck. The truck intersected the boggy low land, divided by the dike, a road approaching the hills from the other direction. The railroad also went that way. Here by the settlement it seemed endless, but beyond the Yankan Pass, twenty kilometers to the north, the tracks ended. That was where the crew was going.

The thick forest took in the truck and concealed it. Buffeted by the wind, Liutov headed for the center of the settlement where the train administration was situated. The doleful song of the inebriated peasants accompanied him. They forgot, or perhaps they didn't know the song and, like a broken record, kept repeating the same words—"around the world for you".

Their singing irritated Liutov. Perhaps his gloomy mood was caused by fatigue and the stress of the last few days. Deep down he was opposed to his people working that night. He knew better than anyone else that they would have to work themselves to the bone, at top capacity, because of the conditions of the harsh region, because of someone's clumsiness, and for many other important reasons. But when such an immense construction project unfolds not everything goes smoothly. Trains with rails, bricks, ties, and blocks get held up at distant stages, trucks with groceries and clothing get stuck in the passes. The cycles and schedules get disrupted, and for every hitch days of emergency work drag on.

And nobody could say when such an unstable situation would end... When he thought about this, Liutov became even gloomier, and sighed heavily. Furthermore, while working at the road in the morning he already felt that he was coming down with the flu. His large body was at times filled with sticky warmth, at others was racked with a chill. "How I'd like to collapse in bed right now," he thought with a sigh, but the street led to a small square in front of a long, one-storey building.

To be honest, Liutov wasn't very fond of the office, because of all the hasty confusion and pushing and shoving there. Someone was always requesting or demanding something, and most often they came to him, although his assis-

tants could decide many questions. And he sent most of the petitioners to them, but no sooner did one leave than another arrived, and also began begging: give me a bulldozer, give me mobile homes, give me iron parts, beds...

A strange thing happened: in the administration office, where the chief's creative work was supposed to take place, his reflections and estimations as to the best solutions, most of the time was wasted on nonsense. Even in the evening he did not always manage to think calmly, to be alone.

Opening the door to the office, Liutov could still hear the recurrent cry: "I love you so, I'm se-e-e-t..." Swearing, he crossed the threshold and entered the narrow, half-lit corridor.

In his office Liutov turned on the desk lamp, pulled off his cap and put it on the windowsill, stood thoughtfully for a moment, and then sat at the desk without taking off his coat. Picking up the telephone receiver, he asked the woman on duty to connect him with the Bam station.

"There's no connection with them, Pavel Zakharovich," the operator answered. "There hasn't been one since one p.m."

"What about Tynda?"

"There is one with Tynda, but the line is busy."

Sighing, he hung up the receiver, sat more comfortably, and, with a feeling of relief, stretched out his legs. He hoped that now at least he would have a chance to be alone, to sit calmly for a while, and not worry about anything. But somebody's figure immediately loomed in the dark doorway, and, looking closely, Liutov saw the correspondent in his overcoat, its collar raised as always, and in high felt boots.

Liutov looked at him silently for several seconds and then asked listlessly:

"The helicopter pilot didn't take you?"

"Why no," the correspondent smiled. "It was too late for me to reach home before the holiday, and your getting to the hundred and third kilometer is worth some articles and sketches. If it takes place, of course... I have a few questions on the topic."

The correspondent headed for the table, intending to have a talk with the train chief, whom he had not managed to catch alone before.

"Wait a minute," Liutov stopped him, and, taking a piece of paper began to write. Without stopping he asked, "Have you eaten supper yet?"

"N-no..."

"I thought so... The dining room has just opened. Go get some supper and give this note to the manager."

The correspondent took the paper and read: "Olga Fedorovna! Please arrange a good dinner tomorrow for the whole fitters' crew. They're laying rails—now, today, and tomorrow! Do you understand? Liutov."

"This is the most useful thing we can do—for the time being," Liutov said. "And let's put off our conversation... Don't get the wrong idea, I can't right now."

Still hoping for something, the correspondent stood for a moment with the scrap of paper in his hand, waiting and looking at the tired, gloomy face of the chief, dark beyond the circle of light, and then headed for the exit. Liutov heard his soft steps and, when the front door creaked, he lowered his head on his clenched fists.

He had definitely come down with the flu. A tight, heavy weight filled his head, his thoughts trailed slowly, confusedly; but, as always, he thought about the main thing—about the people on the road, about laying the rails and about the kilometers. Then he recalled a birch tree which he had seen by the road during the day. It had been struck by a bulldozer blade. The laceration laid bare the pale yellow core of the trunk. This recollection caused Liutov dull pain and shame... Who had struck the birch? Couldn't he have gone around it, turned the machine more carefully? Probably a malicious or indifferent man sat behind the levers.

"When creating something large and significant people inevitably lose in small ways..." Someone had made up this justifying aphorism. But at once he recalled the face of an old hunter, bearded, with deep wrinkles, in whose winter hut Liutov had once had to spend the night. "You, my boy, build your main line, make your road," the old man said with a restrained sense of grievance while whittling splinters out of kindling. "But show more feeling, don't lose your head, keep looking underfoot. Don't destroy life, protect living things... Our taiga is great, but it's not endless.

It's easy to knock it down, but hard to lift it up. And there won't be anybody to do it... You'll all scatter to different places..."

Liutov had grown up at a small station, surrounded by the Far East taiga. It fed people and kept them warm, and since he was a child he imagined the forest to be a kind, living creature, which spared nothing for people.

Even when nature rages it can preserve its balance if man's shortsightedness doesn't interfere with its laws. Liutov understood that it was necessary to cut down forest, and on his orders they made wide cuttings. But he was infuriated by an overly broad sweep, a thoughtless attitude towards the problem. He had the harshest words for one of the work superintendents who decided to clear all the trees and shrubs here, on the Yahkansk Slope, the site of the future settlement. But is he the only such work superindendent...? And you can't give each of them a piece of your mind. There are thousands of people around, among whom some are capable of crippling a harmless birch.

The wind was swinging the outside casement window, but in order to close it he would have to get up, and Liutov didn't even feel like stirring. And so he sat in his sheepskin coat, with his head resting on his clenched fists. He felt sad and lonely.

Lifting his head, Liutov stared aloofly at the dimly lit map of the locality, which he knew down to the most minute details. Over there the famous Trans-Siberian Railroad cuts through forests and mountains. And there is the point where a thin red thread rises from it to the north. It is knotted with small circles bearing the names of stations and halts. Shturm, Murtygit, Silip, Anosovskaya... But the red line extends still farther in the direction of the Belenkaya station. It intersects squares on the map. The ninetieth kilometer, the ninety fifth... This morning it hit the ninety ninth. Now it could be continued to the hundredth. But there were still two kilometers ahead, to the boundary of the division. So far they are marked only by a dotted line. And right now the most important thing was to connect the dots and bring the red line up to the "103" mark.

Liutov leaned back on the chair and sighed, closing his

eyes. Damn it, on top of everything else... He pictured the heap of pills he would have to swallow and the cool pillow which lured him as much as the hundred and third... And right then, warming his heart, his memory brought close the face of his son. "How are you, little man?" Having asked, he glanced at his watch and sadly shook his head. Vladivostok time, children would already be in bed... Yes, tomorrow is a holiday, and she will have guests; she probably sent him to her mother's. She never said "to grandmother". "Oh, buster, hurry and grow up..."

Right then he was struck by an audacious idea. "What if I should turn up right now in their golden sea-side autumn, in the company of her 'dear' friends? Just as I am now, in fur-covered boots and a sheepskin coat!..." But, knitting his brows, Liutov stopped himself. "The hell with it! It wouldn't surprise them."

Unsure steps in the corridor put Liutov on his guard and, turning his head, in the dim light of his office he saw a girl in a light nylon jacket and red cap with long hanging ear flaps. She greeted him softly without crossing the threshold, and asked:

"Could you tell me where I can find Liutov? Pavel Zakharovich..."

"Can I help you?" he asked.

"I came here to work. And I have nowhere to sleep..."

"Come in. People don't talk across a doorway."

The girl stepped into the office and stopped by a row of chairs arranged along a wall. Liutov now saw her face and anxious eyes.

"When did you come and how?" he asked with interest.

"Very recently... On a passing truck from Bam. A real big one. They said it was going further, to Belenkaya station..."

"And where would you like to work with us? What can you do?"

"Actually, I'm a hairdresser", the girl began, but stopped short, seeing the astonished look in the chief's large gray eyes.

"So-o," Liutov said in confusion. "Only I haven't even given a thought to hairdressers. After all, we're building a railroad!"

"No, no, please don't get the idea that I came here to give hairdos," the girl hastened to say. "Or chignons... I work on men's hair, you know. I took a special course. I'll do other work too, I'll learn... Only I won't go back. I don't have the money..."

Recalling Korzinkin's wild side whiskers and the fitters' forelocks crawling out from under their caps, Liutov said softly:

"Actually, our builders also need good haircuts..." Frowning, he asked: "You came, of course, without authorization and without a summons from the construction administration?"

"I went to the town Komsomol committee," the girl said softly. "They said a crew would be sent from our region later."

"And what about your parents? Did they let you go?"

Throwing back her head, the girl looked at the chief with a secretive smile.

"I live on my own."

"I understand," Liutov muttered, dissatisfied with himself, and took a piece of paper. Dashing off a few words, he got up from the desk. "Give this note to the head of the dormitory. It's not far from here, on the road, to the right of the club. I think they'll fix you up there. And after the holiday we'll decide what to do further... Do you have enough to live on right now?"

The girl took the paper and smiled.

"Thank you..."

Now Liutov no longer saw the recent anxiety in her eyes. Joy itself, which, it turns out, is not at all hard to bestow, looked at him gratefully.

"Thank you," the girl repeated. "I'll manage for the time being, comrade Liutov."

The girl went to the door, but turned again at the threshold and said softly:

"I wish you a happy holiday!"

She slammed the front door, but Liutov was still standing by the desk. With a bitter sigh, he got a cigarette and said aloud:

"Thanks. I'm already celebrating the holiday..."

A sharp, businesslike, demanding ring pierced the silence

of the office. "At last," Liutov thought gloomily, picking up the receiver. "*He* must be calling . . ."

"Why don't you say anything?" asked the familiar husky voice of the head of the construction administration. "Tell me how everything is . . ."

"Things are moving along."

"I know." Irritation could be heard in the head's voice.

"But how are they moving?"

"Before changing shifts the eighth picket of the hundredth kilometer was laid. More than two are left for Buryanov. They'll work all night, until they come to the hundred and third."

"That's different." The head's voice softened. "Otherwise, you understand, I was really getting the blues. You probably think you're the only sufferer in all of BAM, and all the rest of us are sitting at our holiday table and feasting away, right?"

"Has there been anything from Moscow?"

"Don't think about Moscow now, think about yourself. About your kilometers. Don't forget that the maneuver is worth a lot of money." Falling silent, the head sighed. "Two thousand one hundred meters, you say? . . . Quite a bit is left. And what about the supply of packets? I tried to get through to the supply office, but . . ."

"There's no line to Bam for the time being."

"That's right, it's always like that. Our line is silent one day and doesn't talk at all the next."

"The teams have been left only one 'rotator.' I think I'll drive along the line to see where the other one got stuck. At the same time I'll take a hop over to the assemblage . . ."

"Then don't dawdle. If the supply office stops it means curtains for the whole enterprise."

"Understood."

"Good boy . . . Celebrate, Liutov! And keep me informed. Call at any time . . ."

Puffing his cigarette at last, Liutov called the garage at once. Not waiting for the car to drive up, he went out on the street, and was greeted by a hard, driving wind.

Neither the cold nor the late hour could stop the life of the settlement. At the outskirts, the diesel of the electric power station chugged monotonously. Music could be heard

from inside the club, and the frozen windows of houses and dormitories looked wide-eyed out into the street. Behind one of these windows the young hairdresser must be settling in, getting to know her neighbors.

The car turned out of a lane, blinding him. Shielding his eyes, Liutov stepped back to the edge of the road, but the car stopped abruptly a step away from him. He recognized the light blue minibus of the administration. The doors of the vehicle opened and Liutov heard the merry voice of the driver Gafurov:

"If you please, Pavel Zakharovich! Your carriage is ready!"

"It's clear, Gafurov, that you've been reading your fill of detective stories," Liutov grumbled goodnaturedly, opening the door. "Everything you say is so affected..."

Climbing on the seat next to the driver, he slammed the door, shutting out the bad weather. Arranging his legs, clumsy in their thick fur-covered boots, he asked:

"How are you fixed for fuel?"

"We're up to our ears in it," Gafurov smiled. "Will we be going far?"

"Figure it out—a mere nothing... We'll just take a spin to Bam and back."

Giving a whistle, Gafurov pushed his cap to the back of his head and scratched his forehead.

"It's almost two hundred k.m.'s there and back." When he finished his calculations, he summed up: "We'll be back in the morning."

"You'll make it in time for your holiday pies," Liutov comforted the driver. "Let's dash off now in the other direction, to the track laying."

"A chief's order is law for his underling... Since I've had such luck already, we may as well go to the track laying too. We have nothing to lose."

"Don't groan, Gafurov, don't groan."

Gafurov turned the minibus around on the crooked, smoothed street and drove it out on the road which led from the settlement. The driver's face became tense, his hands quickly grabbed the black circle of the steering wheel, feeling every turn of the wheels, responding to every rut.

Gafurov had already been Liutov's driver before the latter began working on the train. When he moved to the settle-

ment, he dragged Gafurov along—he had grown used to him. They got along well. When necessary they could be silent without awkwardness, but more often they talked about business or, in the words of Gafurov, about the “ticklish” things of life. They didn’t always agree, and they often sat silent for a long time, buried in thought. There wasn’t a great age difference between them and, besides, during his twenty six years, the fellow from a suburb of Kazan had managed to knock around the world a bit, like Liutov, and had gathered some worldly wisdom.

But one’s mood changes on a long trip, like the landscape beyond the windshield. And besides, Gafurov was incapable of being silent for long, and he already knew how to draw Liutov imperceptibly into a conversation. And so now, having driven past the dike and several turns among the hills, at the exit from the cutting, he turned to the chief and, smiling, showed his white teeth.

“Have you heard, Pavel Zakharovich, the funny thing that happened here yesterday?”

“Well, go on . . .”

“Our bang-bang boys prepared an explosion. To clear out the cutting. They stopped traffic, as had been agreed. The drivers gathered in their cabs to shoot the breeze . . . Well, they soon gave a bang! And it was such a healthy one, they say, that the trailer of the lumber truck which stood closest, jumped and jerked like a fired cannon, and it returned to the ground minus a couple of wheels . . . The wheelbase had been torn away!”

“For funny things like that somebody’s head should roll,” Liutov remarked.

“And the devil knows how it happened . . . Either somebody had miscalculated the amount of explosives or else the blast misfired. But the fact is that the trailer is now stretched out under the bushes. And the wheels were tossed about fifty paces . . .”

Turning sharply, the road descended into a narrow, deep gulley with a bridge thrown across it, and led the car to a broad log with a barely perceptible embankment. Tracks stretched out right alongside, and soon an island of lights could be seen in the darkness. Gradually Liutov began to distinguish light bulbs above the track laying machine and

the headlights of the locomotive, standing at the end of the train with links. The embankment, where there were no rails yet, was lit by the dense light of a projector, in whose ray people were moving.

Gafurov stopped the car next to the track-laying machine.

Coming out on the railroad bed, Liutov recognized Buryanov first among the workers. Flooded by the projector's light, the foreman stood with his arm raised. In front of him a link, slowly descending and bent under its own weight, was rocking. Waving his mitten slightly, Buryanov was signalling the winch operator and, catching the right moment, bellowed:

"Lower!"

The link crashed onto the embankment, and the fitters came up to it at once. The collars of their sheepskin coats and their caps were covered with frost; their beards had curled up and looked gray. Hiding their faces from the wind and sharply exhaling steam, the men fastened the rails.

Liutov stepped onto the embankment and, shouting over the noise of the motors, asked:

"How is everything, Buryanov?"

"We're creaking along!" Throwing off his mitten, the foreman hurriedly grabbed cigarettes from his pocket. "But we're still moving! You see, we're on the third picket of the hundred and first kilometer." He thrust his face into his palms and lit a cigarette. "The track-laying machine is working badly, Zakharovich. It's just barely crawling..."

"Is it freezing?"

"Yes, it is. All the oil has frozen, it seems..."

A light struck their eyes from the darkness into which the railroad bed disappeared, and, the rumble of a heavy diesel growing, it approached the track-laying site. Looking closely, Liutov noticed sparks flying out of the exhaust pipe, and asked:

"What's that banging?"

"Aah, I've got a bulldozer here... It loosens and evens the railroad bed. And it also might come in handy for traction."

"Do you have diesel oil?"

"Yes..."

"Make torches and warm the axle boxes of the track

laying machine, all the coupling points. Warm it till it's red hot if you have to, but get it moving!"

"Understood... What about the links? We have enough for another one-and-a-half or two hours..."

"You'll have your rails, Buryanov, you'll have them... I'm going along the line to Bam now. The 'rotator' got stuck somewhere... Don't worry, we'll hurry them on. And let your boys at least take turns in the heated enclosure. Be careful they don't get frozen."

"Everything will be all right... Step on it, Pavel Zakharovich!"

Gafurov had already turned the car around... Taking cover behind it, he was talking with a tall man in a fur coat and felt boots. The wind tore sparks away from both of their cigarettes and made fiery lines with them in the darkness, and then extinguished them at once. Only when he came up close did Liutov recognize his apartment neighbor, old man Egorov.

"So it's your 'tank' turning around here?"

"Mine, Zakharovich," he said, his voice harsh from a cold. "I'm laying the railroad bed here and there... Or at least I'm trying. I'll scratch it here and smooth it out there. It's frozen after all..."

"Is there a lot left?"

"Well, I'm not hurrying. I'll go ahead of the track laying machine. You understand, machines rolled the surface of the old railroad bed in this division in such a way that it's impossible to stand. And the fitters have to lean against it besides, and to push the links. So they asked me to dig this layer, so they would have support..."

"All right, old fellow, go ahead and help. Only you know, Prokopievna's pies are going to be overdone."

"Oh, it's a shame about the pies. We won't let them go to waste!"

The old man waved his hand and, straight and tall, set out for the bulldozer, rumbling about twenty steps away on the railroad bed. Gafurov and Liutov climbed into the car, which was amazingly warm after the frost and wind.

"Now step on it to Bam!"

The car started abruptly. Taxiing towards the road, Gafurov said, twisting his head:

"You know, Pavel Zakharovich, I'll remember our boys up to their bellies in hoarfrost all my life."

"BAM is still ahead, you'll be seeing a lot more."

"No-o, Pavel Zakharovich... The first thing always leaves a deeper mark."

Raising his brows, Liutov looked at the driver and sighed, but didn't say anything, inhaling cigarette smoke.

They were silent for a long time, each experiencing the jolting of the badly broken road and the warmth of the car in his own way. Only when they tore through the quiet streets of the settlement, Gafurov said in the tone of a lively guide:

"Up ahead, comrades, we have the Murtygit station... It is forty kilometers from Yankan and the same distance from the Trans-Siberian Railway." Here, recalling something, he turned to Liutov. "Yes, I recently learned why our station is called Anosovskaya. It turns out that over a hundred years ago a mining engineer named Anosov spent time in this locality. He was the first to discover gold here. Somewhere along the Selemdzha and the Dzhalinda..."

Gafurov spoke of Anosov with pleasure, as of a respected close relative.

"Just think about it, Pavel Zakharovich... The whole Soviet Union is behind us. All kinds of technology. We have helicopters, landrovers. Vehicles with caterpillar treads. And thousands of people—and look what effort the kilometers and cuttings take. Just imagine what it used to be like here. They write that we're blazing a trail through the backwoods, through untouched wilderness... As for the backwoods, I agree, but, after all, a Russian man had already passed through here a hundred years ago." Gafurov fell silent, passing a turn. "But it's good that such people are remembered. Let's say a train approaches the station. A passenger reads the name: 'Anosovskaya'. You know, the man will begin to wonder why it has such a name, and will want to find out. Marble plaques with an explanation should be set up at such stations. So it will be clear at once what the man did to deserve such an honor, what he did for people and when..."

Gafurov looked askance at the motionless Liutov and smiled.

"Just imagine such a picture, Pavel Zakharovich . . . Again a train approaches the station. A passenger gives a blank stare and reads the name: 'Gafurovka' . . . Why, all of Kazan would celebrate! Gafurovka, eh?"

Liutov opened his dry lips and remarked:

"It sounds countrified, somehow."

"O-oh, it won't happen, anyway." Gafurov sighed, crestfallen. "Because my heroism is unproven. Besides, there are so many drivers here that there aren't enough kilometer posts to go around. And they wouldn't hack out a personal post for someone as unlucky as me."

"What do you mean? You sound as if you were sitting around and doing nothing."

"Sure. I drive . . . the bosses." He frowned, and a childish, injured expression appeared on his face. "No, Pavel Zakharovich, no matter what, I'm definitely changing this jalopey for a better model."

Liutov got a cigarette and lit it:

"Are you going to earn a name?"

"What name?"

"Why, 'Gafurovka'!"

"Oh, that's all baloney."

Gafurov fell silent, keeping his eyes on the road while driving down from the pass. At turns, the rays of the headlights sometimes hit the bare, snow-covered mountain slopes, and at others dissipated, getting lost in the thickets. At times it seemed that the road had ended, but then the turn was over, and again the white, rolled corridor stretched ahead of them, amidst the forest.

Resting against the seat back, Liutov wrapped himself more tightly in his sheepskin coat—he had the chills. But he wasn't thinking about his illness. Behind them, beyond the hills, something was being completed for which thousands of people had gathered in this region—dozens of construction-assembly trains, mechanized columns, bridge-building teams, subdivisions of explosives experts, workshops, supply offices, and consumer and cultural sections had been created. Each of them had its own job, but one thing made their very existence possible: building the railroad. And its last and main feature was laying the tracks, the kilometers, for the free movement of workers' trains.

And the more kilometers completed, the higher the work of the whole BAM Railroad Construction was valued. If it weren't for those kilometers, the work of all the subdivisions would lose their meaning.

The railroad, the railroad . . . How easily you carry trains and goods later, but how hard you are to master now. Gafurov was right. The highest quality supplies. Heaps of powerful technology. And enough manpower for the time being . . . And everything seems simple. Prospectors had passed through before you, they laid out a course, composed a plan, approved it. Now just rush your technology here, get some people on the spot. Let some build housing, others make a cutting, measure off the railroad bed, open up railroad cuttings, build bridges. And after this the last stage remains—laying the rails, the kilometers . . .

Yes, if only that were all . . . going smoothly! You no sooner take a step here than you come up against a mountain, a precipice, or a bottomless abyss the likes of which you couldn't even imagine earlier. The builder confronts stony scree, the rocky banks of rivers and streams. Here you have immense bogs with permafrost, with lakes of ice under a covering of hummocks and mosses. If you strip them off, disturb them, a bottomless bog is formed. And there are enough boggy places in the taiga without that. People lay roads through them to let through powerful trucks with spans and concrete piers for bridges, metal girders, and heavy mechanisms. You have to pass over rivers and hollows, and cut through hills with a core of stone and ice. They have become so soldered together over the centuries that they don't yield at once to the savage force of explosives.

Can you really foresee everything? And so the work schedule is bursting at the seams, and volumes are increased only by meters of railroad bed, centimeters of concrete added on to the bridge piers . . . But time doesn't stand still, it demands kilometers. And for the sake of forward movement you have to seek a way out of the most difficult situations, and sometimes make seemingly unlikely decisions.

In October things had been very complicated. At the beginning of the month the railway route went past the Anosovskaya station and the settlement. The rails already extended to the "ninety" mark. But farther to the north, at

the ninety first kilometer, explosions were still roaring and excavators moving about. They were opening one of the longest cuttings on the route there. And at the ninety sixth and ninety seventh kilometers they were just raising the bridge tiers. No less than two months were needed to complete them.

Yet they had promised to lay rails up to the Belenkaya station—to the hundred and thirty second kilometer—by the end of 1974, and to get the first freight train to Tynda by the thirtieth anniversary of victory in World War II. Work forces had already been scattered all over Great BAM. Kuvykta, Mogot, Nagorny were being built... Komsomol teams made forest cuttings in the west. A strong road stretched out to the east. Drilling tools buzzed, powerful explosions rocked the air. A two-hundred-meter bridge spanned the rapid Gilyui... BAM required thousands and thousands of tons of cargo. If it didn't come, work would be silenced, the construction would be halted in many divisions.

But without bridges and cuttings the rails couldn't be extended... And it was twice as annoying, because farther on, in the neighboring division, from the hundred and third kilometer, the railroad bed was ready, with all its bridges and pipes. But how could they get there, beyond the hundred and third kilometer? You can't toss a track laying machine through the air... Should they begin delivering the rails along the road? But what trucks could carry twenty-five-meter links? And besides, there was no road in this division capable of bearing such a load. It wasn't needed here previously—it had to be built, too... At that time the head of administration had been in the division of Liutov's train several times. He drove to the bridges, to the railroad cutting, he gave the concrete workers and machine operators a grilling, although they were not so much at fault. It seemed as if nature itself was against people. The ten-meter-deep foundation pit for the bridge spans was flooded with water seeping through the soil, concrete froze in the cold weather. And they were supposed to lay it warm, so it would take hold. And what could the machine operators do when even their explosives were powerless before nature? The explosion experts would drill the frozen ground, charge it, blow it

up with all their might. The rock and stones flew up and fell again with a thud in the same place. They seemed to have been exploded, you could scoop them up with an excavator. But it only seemed that way... Furthermore, everything which burst out from the interior of the earth immediately froze solidly together.

The head of the building administration knew the situation, he saw everything and understood the reasons for the delay. But understanding didn't make things any easier. He often looked at the map in Liutov's office, with a thin line marking the old railroad which had been built here before the war. During the thirty five years the railroad bed had become overgrown with shrubbery and trees, and in spots had been destroyed. They didn't even use it everywhere as a road.

But the head was weighing something, and during the next flying visit decided to go with Liutov along a chosen division of the old railroad bed. They were mostly silent, observing the landrover crawling through the thicket. Where the embankment was stronger, the wheels of the vehicle easily covered the distance. But then they would suddenly collapse into the pliant quick ground and skid. The hummocky bog with the young forest was spread out on both sides of the old railroad bed, and gradually extended towards the hills, on whose slopes the path of the new road lay.

After surveying the locality, Liutov, without noticing it, began using the expression "detour maneuver". He had heard it from *him*. Standing on the mud-guard of the landrover, the head of administration drew on the dusty tarpaulin with his finger, explaining how, by the maneuver, they could skirt the bridges and cuttings. The essence of his proposal came down to the following:

Liutov's people should clear and strengthen the old railroad bed and join it with the hundred and third kilometer; passing the cutting, they should lay the rails down to the boggy gorge and come out on the old embankment;

skirting the bridges and cutting, they should lay fourteen kilometers of road and, after completing work on the bridges and in the cutting, dismantle the whole division and transport the links to the projected course...

From personal experience Liutov knew how rarely construction projects were carried out without corrections and changes. The chief's proposal seemed far-fetched to him. Fourteen kilometers of detour is a lot. An awful lot. It seemed too sweeping, but a better solution couldn't be found. They couldn't stand still and keep people busy with unimportant work... But would the others agree with the suggestion?

On the next day the maneuver was already being discussed at the district Party committee. In principle there were no objections, but they requested the decision of the technical council of the building administration.

Liutov, invited to the meeting together with other heads of subsections, sat in a distant corner, observing members of the technical council striving to speak out...

Remembering his own words at the council, Liutov frowned and sighed bitterly... He hadn't behaved himself correctly: he had spoken childishly... Got excited! But he couldn't learn to speak calmly, consistently avoiding sharp corners, as some other specialists he knew could. He saw the main point and went straight to it. He recognized the necessity of the maneuver at once and said so emphatically, but he threw fat on the fire by saying that if anyone didn't understand all the complications of the moment or would like to sit things out in the shadows, shirking his responsibility and biding his time, it would be better if he stayed on the sidelines. Let him say afterwards that he also helped to build...

And in his speech Liutov recalled an incident associated with a prominent construction chief who, in a difficult situation, decided to open train traffic along rails fastened with wooden fish-plates, and with one of the road divisions laid along the bottom of a future sea. When they later filled it, the bridge piers and several structures went under water, and they had to pull up the rails and move them. But the main point was that the railroad itself compensated for all the losses. Before it was flooded, it had worked honestly for about ten years, supplying the immense construction projects of backwoods Siberia with freight. The most important thing then—time—was gained.

Everything seemed clear and justified to Liutov, but the

opponents of the maneuver also had their proofs and examples. And then the head of administration, empowered to manage the millions allocated for the construction, sent an economic substantiation to Moscow to be approved, and ordered Liutov:

"Squeeze past the bridges! . . . As fast and far as possible! We have to make time and events work for us. Then we can be judged as victors. But if the track laying for the detour drags out and our proposal isn't approved, we're in bad shape, Liutov . . ."

Difficult days began. The railroad bed was laid, explosions roared, houses sprang up, but Liutov felt particularly tense. The line was already at the cutting. And the day arrived when the rail laying machine did not turn into the cut, but laid a link straight ahead and downwards, towards the plain between the hills.

Not everybody knew why the road was deflected . . . Once, when the detour laying was just beginning, an excavator driver from the mechanized column approached Liutov. Lighting a cigarette, he proposed:

"Do you want to hear a joke, Pavel Zakharovich?"

"Go ahead," Liutov agreed.

"A stream flowed in a forest. It wasn't large, but you couldn't jump over it or get around it. The animals got tired of wetting their fur coats in the water, and decided to build a bridge across the stream. A donkey was approved as work superintendent. They all met together and tried to think what the bridge should be made of. The squirrels, raccoons, and chipmunks said that it could be made of poles. The lion and bear demanded one of squared beams, while the elephants and hippopotamuses wanted an iron bridge on concrete piers. The donkey listened and listened and began bellowing: 'Why are you arguing over nonsense? We haven't agreed about how we're going to build the bridge—along the river or across it?' " The excavator operator smiled slyly and asked: "Do you get me, Pavel Zakharovich?"

"Sum it up."

"How can I sum it up? This is the third railroad I've built, I've seen everything, but this one is cracking my brain. The cutting is to the side of the road, and so are the bridges. What for? So the passengers can admire them la-

ter on?" The driver screwed his eyes and, not joking now, asked: "Are we building the bridge along the river?"

Liutov looked at the driver and advised him:

"Here's what you should do... When you crawl up on the arm of the excavator with your oil-can, put your hand to your eyes and take a good look ahead. You can always see things better from high up, they say. At the same time, think what we've got here and why it's being done... Get it?"

"Will I see it?"

"If you've got a head on your shoulders you should see it," Liutov told the cheerful driver. "And tell me later what you've understood..."

...The road forced its way through a heap of iron-concrete constructions, boxes, metal girders, saw timber, blocks, pipes, drums with cables—everything which was intended for housing, bridge piers, spans, walls...

"Murtygit station. Please note it on your maps, dear visitors," announced Gafurov, again imitating a guide.

Liutov didn't take his eyes off the tracks near the station. Noticing the tail of the "rotator" with packets of links, he ordered:

"Hold it!"

Slowing down while approaching the edge, the car stopped. Liutov stepped out on the snow and immediately found himself in another world, cold and dark. The wind tore the open door from his hand and slammed it, and Liutov headed for the locomotive. In the dim light the driver was looking for something in a tattered newspaper, while his assistant—a kid of eighteen with light brown hair—was busy sewing a strap with a needle, waxed thread, and an awl. A thermos stood on the ledge in front of the inspection window, and layers of bread and bacon lay on a piece of paper.

Seeing Liutov in the cab, the assistant smiled.

"Look, Timofei! The chief has dropped by. That means we're on the go."

"It's real cozy here... Like the room of a mother and child," Liutov remarked when he greeted them. "Why are you standing still, comrades? Why don't you move on?"

The driver looked about five years older than his assis-

tant and more serious, as a driver should. He unhurriedly filled a mug and handed it to Liutov.

"Have some coffee and warm up." Glancing at their route schedule, he explained: "We arrived here thirty two minutes ago. The assistant station master says that a train of empty cars is headed towards us. They'll probably let us go after it arrives."

"Are the platforms loading at Bam?" Liutov asked, hurriedly sipping from the mug.

"I didn't see . . . But a 'rotator' is standing there."

"Yes, it is," his assistant confirmed. "The full coupling. And people seem to be milling around at the assemblage..."

Having drunk up the coffee, Liutov put the mug in its place.

"Thanks, fellows . . . I'll drop in on the assistant station master now, and as soon as they give the go-ahead, you step on it to the end of the road . . . They're laying rails there!"

"Understood!" the driver responded, and looked through the window, beaten by the wind, which was sweeping snow between the rails. "In such weather . . . Ye-es..."

"We'll tear off, comrade Liutov," the driver's assistant grinned. "As fast as the speed limit will allow!"

After going down a steep stairway, Liutov walked around a train of open cars loaded with pre-fabricated housing components, and headed for the mobile home, where a light was burning in the window. This mobile home with its wheels removed, inconspicuous amidst the heaped up freight, was the only station building at Murtygit.

Liutov saw an elderly man with a long face and thick bristles on his sunken cheeks at the on-duty table. He was wearing a gray shirt outside his pants, and a strip of his white undershirt could be seen underneath. The old fellow was faint from the heat coming from the stove, but sat in high felt boots up to his knees.

He stared at Liutov with the sad eyes of a sick man.

"Why are you holding up the 'rotator' with the links?" asked Liutov.

For some reason the assistant station master looked at the register book spread out in front of him, then looked askance at the buzzer, and said mutely:

"A train of empties is coming from Anosovskaya."

"But it might not crawl up until morning, and we need links! Track laying is underway at the hundred and first. Do you know that?"

"I'm not required to know it," the assistant station master responded aloofly. "We have standing orders not to hold up empties and to shove them out on the main line . . . And the train was already supposed to have left Anosovskaya during the day . . ."

"But who the devil needs empties on holidays?" Liutov stopped himself at once, realizing the uselessness of such a conversation, and asked a bit more calmly: "Where is the train now?"

"It's approaching Silip . . ."

"Send word that it should be put on a side road there. And let it stand until the 'rotator' with the packets goes by."

"But how will the higher ups . . .?"

"The empties can be put in the bushes, for all I care, but the links have to get by without delay!"

His commanding tone flustered the assistant station master. Looking again at his register magazine with its scrawls, he scratched his bald head.

"It's all the same to us . . . Only whose order will it be?"

"Chief of the advance train . . . And if anybody has any doubts, let him call the head of the building administration."

The assistant station master raised his eyes and by their expression Liutov understood that nobody bold or stupid enough to make such a call would be found.

When he returned to the car, Liutov knocked the snow off his boots on the footboard and climbed onto the seat.

"Let's go, Gafurov! Let's make it non-stop to Bam!"

"If that's the way it turns out, we'll get there non-stop," Gafurov responded. "Drivers never plan ahead on the road, Pavel Zakharovich. If you try it you'll make a mistake. Maybe it's a superstition, a survival of the past, but either you get a flat tire or else something breaks down."

The car sped along the road which, after Murtygit, was broader and better rolled. The basic work was finished on this division, and gradually everything was settling down.

The railroad and auto road ran almost parallel for several kilometers, but then separated, each following the bends of

the Olda River in its own way. The river, quite narrow, with cold, clean water, skirted barriers and rushed to the Amur. The Bam station was situated not far from its intersection with the Trans-Siberian Railway. Founded back in 1912, it had remained inconspicuous until very recently: about ten little houses clung to both sides of the railroad bed. They were inundated by locomotive smoke, disturbed by the roar of heavy trains. Express trains didn't stop, but rushed by. They hurried to big cities, but Bam stayed put, as if waiting for its moment, when two steel threads would stretch to the north from the station rails. People were hurrying to join the old railroad with a new line, the great namesake of the small station.

Who gave it this name? Why "Bam"? Was it named after the main line or in honor of those who built the first road in this locality?

Most likely it was named for neither... Since childhood Liutov had heard the incomprehensible word "bammer". It had been used from time immemorial along the railroad line, and it replaced another word in the vocabulary of grandmothers who were displeased with their mischievous grandchildren—convict. The road, after all, was built by forced labor. By political prisoners, rebels, put in irons after uprisings on landowners' estates in European Russia after 1900.

Time makes everything relative. Both memories of childhood and survivals of the past in the present... The frightening word "bammer" had been preserved from the distant past, but now people were proud of it... The local hills saw how difficult it had been to lay the railroad and how afterwards it remained idle. For long years expectant silence clumbered in the gorges.

But everything flows, everything changes... People came here once again. They came themselves... Completely different people... They control a technology which the first builder could only dream of. And they're using different standards to route the road. Not because the old railroad bed had become overgrown or been destroyed. Trains now have different velocities and sizes. They are capable of scaling great heights, they need different curve radiuses, station boundaries. And the work tempo of the new builders is also completely different. Two years have not yet passed since the laying

of the "silver link", and tonight Buryanov's men are coming to the hundred and third kilometer. The rails are doggedly approaching Tynda, which formerly was also a remote, unknown settlement. But good fortune had destined it to become the largest railroad junction, the capital of Great BAM. From Tynda the road would go further north—to Berkakit. After scaling the Charsky range, the rails will extend to the Angara and the Lena. And to the east it will reach the Amur and the great Pacific Ocean.

Sighing, Liutov leaned towards the windshield and tried to determine their location, but darkness totally covered everything round about.

"Have we already passed Shturm?"

"Didn't you notice?" Gafurov answered. "Bam is just a stone's throw away, you might say."

Gafurov stopped short. He peered intensely ahead and gradually slowed down. Looking closely, Liutov also saw a man standing at the edge of the road, his arm raised and his clothes powdered with snow.

"Who's the snow lover?" Gafurov mumbled, stopping the car. "Where has he come from?"

Shielding his eyes from the light, the man pulled the door. He stuck his large head with its shaggy cap into the car and looked sharply at Liutov and Gafurov, and, in a voice hoarse with a cold, asked:

"Will you give me a lift to Bam?"

"Take a seat..."

The stranger clumsily squeezed inside and, bending his legs, his frozen felt boots sliding on the iron floor, settled down on the near seat. His movements were accompanied by the clank of the safety chains on his broad fitter's belt.

When he had started the car, Gafurov turned half-way and asked:

"What do you call this? Your evening exercises?"

"I'm a signaller..." A cough tore from his chest, "I work on the line..."

Pulling a rucksack, with claws protruding from its mouth, off his back, the signaller grabbed a cigarette with fingers clumsy from the cold. He struck a match and brought it up to his face, which was covered with drops of melted frost.

"There was a break on the line," he explained, inhaling. "I was sent to fix it."

"Ye-es, our communications line is, to tell it straight, a lost cause," Gafurov smiled. "It's good only for telling about death and divorces on it..."

"Why divorces?"

"You won't get through right away in such cases!"

"A-ah... That's not the problem," the signaller said with a sigh, secretly offended. "The root of the problem is the kind of line we've got. Everything is held together by a lick and a promise. In one place the wires are fastened to a post, in another to a tree... It's temporary, you see. And so it breaks. And once there's a break—day or night, snow or rain, you have to go and repair the damage..."

"Imagine such work—you can't even give it away," Gafurov remarked sympathetically and asked: "And if we hadn't come along would you have walked?"

"No... I would have flown."

Gafurov looked askance at the signaller and at Liutov.

"You're a joker all the same..."

"Uhuh. You know, there in the thicket and on the hummocks I had my fill of jokes."

Pursing his lips, Gafurov fell silent and stopped bothering him with questions. The signaller stretched out his tired legs and, apparently exhausted by the warmth, peacefully shut his eyes.

Coming out from the hills, the car rushed through the un-forested valley, in the center of which the lights of Bam twinkled.

Gafurov swerved toward the link assembling section, with a large heated enclosure in the center. Liutov got out of the car first and, looking around, stopped and buttoned up his sheepskin coat. The signaller got out after him, the chains of his belt clanking. His shoulders flinching from the cold, he turned to Gafurov.

"Thanks for delivering me, Blackie. Drop by for tea if you're around some time. My house is the third from the station..."

"All right, all right," the driver waved him away. "Let's hope your wires buzz without breaks..."

The signaller straightened his cap, waved to Liutov, and,

throwing his rucksack with the claws on his shoulder, made his way with broad, unhurried steps to the station rails, occupied with trains, which looked endless in the darkness.

Gafurov also got out of the car. Looking around at the frozen darkness, he said in surprise:

"It seems they've already won the battle here, Pavel Zakharovich."

Liutov didn't answer . . . Driving here, he had hoped to see the rays of the crane projectors, people laying out rails, ties, spikes—everything needed to assemble links. But the division was as dark as an old abandoned well. The "rotator" of half loaded platforms stood on the track near the locomotive. A train of open cars loaded with ties stretched out behind the "rotator", and the box of the petrol engine showed darkly near them. Lights flickered only at the far end of the division, by the crane: regular blows could be heard from there.

Not understanding anything, Liutov went towards the sounds and light. When he came closer, he made out a crane mounted on a truck with a sadly lowered arm. Two men were busy underneath it, illuminated by the headlights. Because of the roar of the diesel, they didn't hear Liutov's steps, all the more so because one of the workers, waving a sledge hammer, was wildly swearing.

"What's going on here?" asked Liutov, coming up close.

A fairly short, stocky fellow in a soldier's jacket and gray cap with ear flaps tied under the chin, straightened up before him. The second worker, also short, dressed in a short quilted coat belted with a red sash, also came at once into the circle of light.

Liutov recognized the crane operator of the Bam division of his train by his extremely snub nose. At his feet lay the head block of the arm, with the cable, gleaming from being worn smooth, pressed between rollers.

"The hoist cable broke", the crane operator answered at last. "We've been working on it for an hour already."

"And where's the crew?"

The crane operator glanced around at the heated enclosure, its lighted windows beckoning from afar, and nodded:

"The crew is there . . . getting warm."

"Do you still have a lot to load?"

"The devil only knows!" the little crane operator said heatedly. "We keep loading and loading—it's like a bottomless pit... Another 'half-rotator' is waiting for us. They say it's the last."

"What are you planning to do with the cable?"

Turning their backs to the wind and stooping over, the fellows were silent for a moment, looking aloofly at the heap of metal at their feet. Then the crane operator, angry because of the break, answered without particular assurance:

"What can we do? It's clear we have to change the cable. If we could only beat out the old one."

The crane operator's assistant stepped over in his felt boots and, sticking his mitten into the tangled strand, droned in a bass voice which didn't fit with his short height:

"And why should we beat it out? We don't have a spare one!"

"So it's even a bigger problem!" Liutov muttered, glancing at the arm and at the crane operator, who was evidently at a loss at such a tense moment, and ready to do anything, rather than nothing.

"If we could at least beat it out," he answered his comrade's remark. "Just see how it's pressed in. Then maybe we can tighten what's left with a clasp..."

"Are there other cranes on the base?" Liutov asked.

The fellow raised his head and looked at the chief, trying to guess his thoughts. But hanging his head, he waved his hand.

"There aren't any like this... There are some ZILs, but they can't lift a link. And their system is completely different." He bowed down, aiming the sledge-hammer at the block, but he didn't strike. "Actually, two cranes from the mechanized column are kept here for the night..."

"Aha."

"MAZes."

"Why the hell didn't you say so?" Liutov exploded. "Stop fussing uselessly over scraps and step on it to the base! Take any of the MAZes and bring it here. If they don't have fuel or something else, transfer the cable..."

"But they're not our machines..."

"You're acting with my permission! Understand?"

"Yes sir!" the crane operator snapped back, soldier-like. Right then he turned to his assistant: "Alekh, take off the

rag and bind the stays. And get a move on!" Tossing the instrument and heavy devices into the cab, he kept repeating happily: "We can take it... Not the cable, but the whole machine... We'll take care of it quickly. We'll be back before a year is out..."

In a few minutes Liutov, heading for the heated enclosure, heard the intense roar of the MAZ going out on the road behind his back.

After crossing the threshold, Liutov slammed the door behind him and stopped, screwing up his eyes after the darkness. A solid wave of cold air billowed towards the center of the enclosure and immediately broke up and dispersed at the feet of the men sitting at the long table.

The foreman Stebenkov, his face crimson from the heat, was ensconced at the head of the table. The crew, looking alike, with their emblemmed jackets, their youth, and their shaggy forelocks pressed down from their caps, were ranged on both sides of Stebenkov. The caps themselves had been thrown off, and, together with their padded jackets and sheepskin coats, lay in the corners, in dark heaps along the walls of the enclosure.

It seemed to Liutov that they didn't pay any attention to him: armed with forks, knives, and spoons, the link assemblers were laboring over an immense frying pan filled with stew, which was in the center of the table. All this would be nothing... The men work in one crew and so they eat together... But after he had already opened his mouth to greet them, Liutov saw glasses and mugs in front of the men, and on the windowsill, behind the foreman's back, were a couple of empty half-liter bottles standing bashfully aside by the curtain.

"So-o," drawled Liutov before he had a chance to be either surprised or furious. "You're having a bite?"

Several of the assemblers—some of the younger ones—apparently having eaten their fill, had put aside their spoons. Clumsy and heavy in their warm clothes, they left the table and, lighting up, sat down along the walls, right on the floor. But Stebenkov, continuing to handle his fork, looked briefly at the chief and proposed:

"Sit down, Pavel Zakharovich, and break your fast with us."

"Stebenkov, you haven't gone batty by any chance?" asked Liutov, still at a loss for words and having difficulty restraining himself.

"Well, I wouldn't say so . . . Sit down, I say, have something to eat. They've probably sent you to us on an empty stomach. We don't have anything to drink, it's true . . ."

"What are you talking about? . . . Do you understand that people are slaving like the devil there in the cold, they're waiting for rails, while you're guzzling vodka here?"

Glancing at the chief once more, Stebenkov lowered his head, showing a ridiculous lock on the top of his head. He was the only one still at the table. His boys, just as quiet as he, were settled in the corners of the enclosure, stretched out on the floor, propping their heads against the walls, and once they had made themselves comfortable, they closed their eyes, seemingly indifferent to everything in the world. And this further infuriated and alerted Liutov, who didn't understand such behavior by the crew. But he was most surely irritated by the devastating calm of the foreman himself, who was fussing over the roomy frying pan.

Liutov, still restraining himself, moved forward and dropped down on the bench by the table.

"Why aren't you repairing the crane?"

"What do you mean?" Stebenkov asked, slightly surprised. "Our boy is there. And what should the rest do? Get in the crane operator's way and freeze?"

"You might've thought of driving the crane away to the base and taking another."

"We have different rights, Pavel Zakharovich."

"Was the work superintendent here?"

"He was during the day. In the evening he went to see his sick old parents. He had permission . . ."

"See here, Stebenkov, could it be you don't know what's happening on the line?" Liutov asked with a certain bated interest: "Don't you know the assignment for the day?"

Stebenkov moved away from the frying pan of stew, hateful to the hungry Liutov, and with his weather-beaten lips, grabbed a cigarette from his pack.

"I know all about it, Pavel Zakharovich," he answered after getting a light, and shot out point blank: "What's today's date?"

"Don't play the fool . . . I'm asking you a question!"

"But can't I really ask you one?" Only now did the foreman's voice become animated. "If you've forgotten, I'll remind you that the seventh of November is already approaching. The holiday has begun! And on this holiday eve our whole Komsomol-youth crew has turned up here for assembling. And please note that they've come voluntarily, Pavel Zakharovich . . ."

Looking around at the men lying there, Liutov noted that there were quite a few for one shift, and very few were missing from the whole crew. The foreman continued unhurriedly, with his former assurance:

"This whole group, Pavel Zakharovich, has been working since morning . . . We only let the women go for the evening. They always have more cares, you know . . . And why are we slaving here, not counting the hours? For that very same task which you reminded us about and which not one of us,"—Stebenkov gestured towards the crew—"have forgotten for a minute. They're breaking their backs so you'll reach the hundred and third kilometer. We won't be hurt when the glory goes to Buryanov's men, those who laid the rails. In such cases they forget about us in the rear . . ."

"What a tear-jerker!" Liutov interrupted the foreman. "You haven't ever received incentives or bonuses, or been on the Board of Honor?" And not knowing how to shake off Stebenkov's imperturbable calm, he added: "You arranged a drinking bout on the job and you're complaining besides. It's a disgrace!" he said emphatically.

"It's no disgrace at all," Stebenkov objected. "And let me add that now the crew is going to sleep. Look over there, they're already snoring, the hussars . . ."

Having put their crumpled clothes under their heads and, in some cases, simply half sitting by the wall, the tired assemblers were already dozing. Looking at them, Liutov sighed in bewilderment and turned his glance to Stebenkov, hanging over the table like a glacier.

"So let's not make any noise, Pavel Zakharovich. Everything will get done." The foreman put out his cigarette butt in a can and was silent a moment, thinking about something. He explained: "The most we've ever squeezed out be-

fore was one and a half 'rotators' of packets. That was considered the limit. Today two have already been sent off. Half the third train is loaded . . . We have to load three more platforms, and we'll assemble them in two hours."

"Well, you should have assembled . . ."

"The crane made us lose our stride." Stebenkov gave a powerful yawn. "We'll assemble them, Pavel Zakharovich. Now the boys will get an hour's nap and the carousel will then go spinning again. There's a limit to human strength, you have to understand that . . . And they drank a hundred grams of vodka each. For their front-line work! After such work you don't get drunken, only weak, like from a sleeping pill . . ."

Liutov was silent, hunched over on the bench. He was dissatisfied with himself. He thought about the strangeness of his position. As the chief, he should have smashed the foreman to bits and perhaps discharged him, but as a man who knew the conditions of transport construction well and who had seen quite a bit which is not always described in sketches and which people are bashfully silent about in their talks with correspondents, he understood the foreman. However, he had to do something, or at least say something . . .

"If the 'rotator' doesn't leave the station in three hours, Stebenkov," he began uncertainly, "there'll be an order in for your reprimand and . . ."

The frozen creak of the door came to his aid. He saw Gafurov's face above a cold cloud.

"Greetings to the Stakhanovites!" Gafurov was about to begin, but Liutov's warning gesture stopped him. Giving a puzzled look at the men lying side by side, Gafurov approached the table and, staring at the frying pan, sniffed with pleasure.

"And I was thinking, where a poor driver can get fuelled up . . ."

"Sit down!" Stebenkov ordered him. "Chew away and keep quiet . . . And you, Pavel Zakharovich, fortify yourself. Here, take clean forks . . ."

Stebenkov doled out a thick slice of bread for each of them and, sitting opposite one another, Liutov and Gafurov began to eat—Gafurov hurriedly, as though he was being

driven out on the road again, and Liutov with restraint, thoughtfully glancing from time to time at the sleeping men. Then looking at the foreman, he asked softly:

"Did you feed those fellows? The crane operator and his assistant?"

"They drank some tea... When they get the job 'done they'll eat. There's enough stew for everybody..."

And the foreman fell silent again. It was quiet and cozy in the enclosure. The "hussars" were snoring peacefully. Stebenkov became lost in thought.

"Pavel Zakharovich, you should down more of the grub. Don't be shy—bite away. We're not in a restaurant, where you have to put on airs. With our kind of freezing weather you have to eat heartily..."

"Now I look at you and, it's just amazing, but I feel that we're alike in some way, Pavel Zakharovich. It's not so easy to see or even to talk about... But still and all, we have something in common. Our situation is similar, those kilometers are weighing on both you and me... Maybe our age makes us alike? You're just over thirty and I'm already almost thirty... And maybe it's been our whole blessed life? I heard that you worked and then graduated from the institute. I worked too, then the army, and then work again. This is your second building project and it's my fourth railroad... You're chief of the train and I'm one of the foremen. And today we're both going without sleep. Ye-es... Until the train leaves here, until the last packet has been loaded on the platform. You're going to be running around longer, as far as I can see. Until the link on the hundred and third is laid.

"I'm going to fork out a reprimand to you, he says... Go right ahead! To tell the truth, he didn't exactly show up at a good time... And even he seems made to be chewing wire instead of bread, he is so tense. But it's a good thing that he thinks before he acts, and he's no bluffer, like some of the work superintendents. And if it really comes down to an argument, I can also raise a ruckus. Why, let's say, don't we have good projectors? The light at the assemblage is not worth a damn! You can't hit the spike every time. And a sledge-hammer isn't like a pencil; even a fool doesn't feel like lifting it for nothing. Because of the dark-

ness we sometimes don't even place the tiers on the mark, and then the fitters give us a piece of their mind. But I won't mention that yet... He didn't start making a fuss, he tried to get to the heart of the matter. That's what I like about him.

"In a word, he's a guide! And how the boys need a firm fatherly hand—there's no point in hiding our faults.

"Let's take Sanya Vorotilin. The long-haired devil! He's really thought up a pastime for himself. He gets a ticket, sits in the express restaurant and goes as far as time allows. At the next station he moves to the restaurant of the return train and comes home.

"Sanya rides around because he's bored. And probably because he's used to showing off. And what does he care, he has only himself to think about? He drops a hundred and fifty for grub and has enough clothes for three fops. And so he's looking for ways to spend his money. And he drags his pal Kolya Anarkheev along with him. That lanky fellow takes his place alongside Sanya. He sniffles... A button nose, open mouth—just like a little kid. And he can bend a crowbar, and your 'paw' is crushed in his hands. Pure Anarchist, as Sanya has christened him in a friendly manner. And it's hard to see what they've got in common. Sanya is an educated, clothes-conscious kid. He has high class manners. He's knocked around cities, plans to graduate from technical college. But Kolya can't stand up or sit down without some emergency occurring. He's always either breaking something, or losing something. And he's also there, on the restaurant trail...

"Let them try to go again... The youngsters are already trying to keep up with them. Last time four former tankmen went on a spree... They also share a room. They arrived in a crew after they were demobilized. We've now got fifteen of these rascals in the crew. A complete set, from private to sergeant first class. Soldiers... They've just barely hit twenty, and these kids have already finished service. And they all have specialities... That group likes to do things in a big way.

"It's the roots that make a tree strong. Each one of them draws its drop of water into the trunk, but they're all different from one another. Like the fingers of my fist. You end

up with one fist, but the fingers all have different names and their own appearance. The thumb, say, is the head. Something like the senior member. Like me. Here's its neighbor, the index finger. That's just what Sanya Vorotilin is. That fellow is always in the public eye. A shirker can't survive around him, and even after work he'll always throw in some idea for everybody.

"And here's the middle finger sticking up. It stands out farthest of all, and the whole force of a blow falls on it. That's just what Kolya the Anarchist is. A powerful kid with a naive soul. There's great strength in him, but how much more practical wisdom Kolya has to accumulate! Maybe that's why he sticks with Sanya? He'll teach him. Both good and bad. Half and half. He needs to find the right girl. Understanding and with a strong character...

"Well, you don't have to guess who's the ring finger. It's Albertik Sandiuk, our good-for-nothing lady's man. Such a person can be around all his life, but he always lags behind the others. Although he's not at all weak. He can always grub for himself... But he lives topsy-turvey. He seems to be moving with the others, but in fact is pushing the opposite way. Until he breaks away.

"Now I've reached the little finger... The little grabber. Here everything is clear too. Lenya is the smallest one in our crew. That's why he works mostly with the crane operator. No matter how small he is, everybody needs him. It wouldn't be good putting Kolya on the sling, he's handier with a crow-bar. And besides, Lenya's sharper than Kolya. While Kolya's thoughts have been scratching around in one spot, Lenya has been there and back five times...

"That's how we are, joined into a unit... We're not standard types—we're completely unique. Each of us gets ruffled, we each have our own mood. Sometimes, as they say, a man will work his pants off, everything he touches turns to gold, and his soul overflows with song, but at other times he's depressed, he'll start whining and babbling all kinds of nonsense. Just try to talk with him then, to touch a sensitive chord, you won't get anywhere! He's unapproachable, it seems... But you've got to do it. And you have to force him to talk. And there's something about Pavel Zakharovich that touches your soul... You might even say that only

someone who also has callouses on his hands, who works alongside others, can understand them, and can be understood himself . . . Aha, our crane has come. The boys have slept for more than an hour. It's time to get up, everybody . . ."

"Your night is over, hussars!"

Even the light bulb over the table swayed from Stebenkov's shout. Or maybe it only seemed so to Liutov. He didn't know whether he had dozed or simply sat for an hour, semi-conscious from exhaustion.

Lifting his heavy head, Liutov straightened his sick body and glanced at the foreman.

"Has the autocrane arrived?"

Stebenkov just nodded while pouring tea in the mugs. But then the door opened and Liutov saw the crane operator in his soldier's jacket with its whitened buttons, and his assistant with the same red sash.

"Everything is all right!" the snub-nosed crane operator informed them. "Our neighbors had a cable and now they don't!"

"Do you want a bite?" Stebenkov asked. "Should I warm up the stew?"

But the boys reached for their mugs.

"It's really good to have some tea!" the slinger said loudly in his fruity bass. "Without tea where can you pick up your strength?"

Gafurov, drowsing on the bench, woke up. Frowning sleepily, he turned his head, not recognizing either the room or the people filling it. Grunting and sighing, the crew pulled on its padded and quilted jackets and soldiers' coats. Almost all of the assemblers sipped the strong tea from the mugs and disappeared behind the door. And Stebenkov, while dressing, shouted orders after them:

"Sanya, hurry to the locomotive and give the platforms a nudge. Then you and your boys apportion the ties. Anarchist—to the platform with the rails. Tankmen—drive the spikes and fasten the anti-theft devices . . . Stoke up the engine, boys, make it shuttle all right . . ."

After about five minutes everything had changed at the assemblage site. The projector rays pierced the darkness. People and platforms moved in their light, ties were lifted

or a long rail sagged, bending on the cable. The MAZ truck droned, blocks and winch cables squeaked, now and then warning bells, voices a hammer blow resounded. Somewhere out of the depths of the blizzard hiding the open cars, the bass shout of the slinger burst out:

"...a-andiu-uk! Take the ties!"

After observing his assemblers for some time, Stebenkov cast a sidelong glance at the train chief standing alongside and, hiding a smile, asked:

"Did you note the time, Pavel Zakharovich?" Seeing Liutov's puzzled look, he explained: "I have an hour and forty minutes before a reprimand is filed against me... Are you going to wait?"

"Don't you wait, but step on it, Stebenkov," Liutov answered sharply, narrowing his eyes. "Later we can laugh about it to our hearts' content... Understand?"

"Of course!" the foreman smiled and added: "Everything will get done, Pavel Zakharovich. The rails will be sent on time... Get going and don't worry!"

The foreman noticed something wrong and, waving his hand, dashed right to the center of the work. Out of obstinacy Liutov stood a little longer and then slowly, looking around the site went to the car.

Gafurov was already sitting at the wheel, warming the motor. Nodding towards the assembling, he smiled.

"A smart beginning... The hussars! It's as if they're not at all tired." Giving a chilly yawn, he asked: "Where are we going to get the rest of our sleep today, Pavel Zakharovich?"

"At the hundred and third, Gafurov... If we have the chance."

"Understood."

It was cool in the car, and Liutov wrapped his sheepskin coat around him more tightly. Looking out the frosted window, Gafurov unhurriedly steered towards the train line.

The windows of the dormitories and houses were no longer lit in the settlement. Life was still stirring only in the vicinity of the station. The maneuver locomotive was moving, light signals were twinkling. They could see the express drive up to the station.

Liutov felt completely miserable but his confidence that

the links would arrive on time kept him going. Although . . . This confidence also weakened him . . . And Gafurov, gripping the black circle of the steering wheel, peered intently at the road, swept by gusts of wind from the blizzard.

The frost was getting harder and if it weren't for the wind in the Oldoi Valley, everything right up to the Yankan peaks would be cloaked in a solid haze. But now the air remained clear and the same bright stars looked at the earth from above.

Gafurov was silent, then, coming out on an even stretch, his eyes gleamed mischievously.

"Should I tell you how I got married, Pavel Zakharovich?"

"You?" Liutov was amazed. "Are you really . . .?"

"Why no, it's just a manner of speaking . . . Symbolically, sort of . . ."

Liutov shook his head in disapproval, and smiled.

"Well, if it's symbolically, then out with it."

"It was fun, just the thing!" Getting ready for the story, Gafurov dug a cigarette out of his pack, got a light, and began, pleasurably puffing smoke: "It happened when I was already here, at BAM . . . I came to the station back before the historic moment with the 'silver link'. Together with my bosom pal. I arrived and, as they say, it was one sad story after another: no housing, and no suitable cars either. We were single, and we saw that even families with kitchen tables were trying to keep warm under birch trees.

"But we got settled . . . My friend got hold of a ZIL truck and I got a workers' bus. I carried mechanization specialists to quarries . . . Otherwise they would send for actors and students, or order one of the chiefs to give them a lift.

"The question of housing also got settled. We found ourselves some place in good time with an old woman. We fixed up her broken-down hovel, gave it a fresh coat of paint, and we ended up with a fine but. We took a couple of beds from the dormitory head, some bedding and stools . . . What more does a single man need?"

"All told, after a couple of weeks we were numbered among the oldtimers at the station. People arrived every day, and all the late comers were against us. We, after all, already had housing, work, and free time.

"In a word, we were on easy street. But a man always

needs something more. Once you get a piece of bread your eyes look for butter. When there's love you want happiness too . . . And that's what happened to us. We were suddenly longing for warmth and affection. And nature itself stirred up this feeling—it was the last month of summer . . . Everything was green, there was dust, midges, berries, and mushrooms. Man can pick them, salt them and store them for his future life. But who would he share that life with? But, to tell the truth, my pal soon found his way to a blonde with a steep bust, and he got so hot all over that there was only one way out—the bonds of matrimony. So I was left alone, sort of on the lookout . . .

“And then one day I was walking near the station, when I heard in the front garden, behind the bushes: ‘My wings are all broken and bruised, there's a terrible pain in my soul . . .’ The person was singing and uttering the words softly but with such feeling that even before I saw her I was enflamed with pity and the most tender feelings.

“They say that love cannot stand pity, that they're incompatible. I think that's nonsense. Love is the highest form of human pity, kindness, and tenderness. But even Allah himself cannot see which is the most important in this mix.

“And so . . . I heard about those wings, broken and bruised, and turned and took a seat in the garden. The birdie looked about twenty. Wearing pants, and with her hair done up. And carrying a bag at her side, plastered with pictures. Well, I was interested in why she was in such a mood. ‘It's just how it is,’ she answered. ‘It's boring here. Nothing but the blues . . .’ And she looked at me with enormous eyes, so lack-luster that they looked black.

“One word led to another and soon we got to know each other. Her name was Sveta, mine, as it still is, Moussah. I hinted that we might spend the evening together. We got up from the bench and started out in the rays of the evening sun. The most lyrical thoughts began whirling around in my head. I thought, now I've met my fate, she and I will join wings and fly about the world in harmony.

“We men begin to go batty faster than the female sex. It's probably because of our strength and pride, our chivalry. We surrender our hands, feet and heart and pledge

love to the grave. But then the laughter and tears begin. Some still have a long way to the grave, but they've buried their love long ago.

"Svetochka comes for a visit. I cut up some cucumbers and tomatoes for a salad, put the tea pot on the table. And she doesn't say a thing! It's all a mystery somehow. Either she's shy or she has nothing to say."

"Listen, Gafurov," Liutov interrupted him, not containing himself. "I never imagined you were a psychologist."

"You have to listen to lectures, Pavel Zakharovich. On love and marriage... Such disputes on the subject rage among us drivers that it makes you want to forget about getting married... But that's another question, which we'll shed some light on later... So, I finished fussing and opened one more jar of something, put it on the table, but she still didn't say anything... Oh, I thought, there'll be an uproar when Sveta and I taxi into our settlement. All Kazan will be buzzing! After three years we'll come like real people, from BAM. Who knows how far the railroad will go in three years. Maybe, I thought, we'll even come here with our offspring.

"But I didn't get far... I look, and my dream was asking for a cigarette, then smoke began coming through her nostrils... And what was she saying... No, I didn't even understand at first. She was saying: 'If you live here alone I'll stay for the night.' I kind of went deaf, my eyes popped out of my head, but she added calmly: 'Don't take it so hard...'

"So I began questioning her about how she lived. I found that she was from the Lake Baikal area, that she had a mother and father there. And after the ninth grade she left school and enrolled in a building vocational school. Here she felt free, found her independence.

"Drinking and dancing began, boys and older fellows. They chucked her out of the school, of course. She went to work, but it wasn't in her nature. She was recruited to some factory, received travelling expenses. 'Good friends' advised her to lose her papers, and that's what she did. On her new papers she was recruited to the building site of an industrial complex, but she couldn't hold out for three months. You have to work hard there! And so, without work-

ing off the travelling expenses and not giving back her work clothes, she made for Nakhodka . . .

"I asked her how she turned up at BAM. And she said that she herself made the stop. She decided to see what was good to be had. And it turned out that she found nothing suitable. The people were rough, not affectionate . . . 'But what's waiting for you in Nakhodka?' I ask. 'Why are you going there?' 'My girlfriend,' she says, 'went to live there before me . . . She writes that it's good there. It has a special night restaurant, for sailors . . .' So that's the kind of good time she needs! But my patience had already run out. I asked her: 'For how long are you going to run around? Before the police detain you and deport you as a parasite?'

"She understood that she wasn't going to spend the night in our shack and headed for the door, saying: 'If you're not all right in the head, you shouldn't pick up girls . . .' Oh, did I explode at that! . . ."

Liutov listened with a slight smile, occasionally squinting at the driver. Gafurov, his attitude towards life and people, interested Liutov.

"Just see how unjust life can be, Pavel Zakharovich," Gafurov concluded.

"Oh, lay off it . . . Life treats everyone alike. It's another matter what people sometimes do to life . . ."

Bending his head, Liutov wrapped his sheepskin over his chest, although it was now warm and cozy inside the car.

Gafurov glanced at Liutov, sitting tense and straight, and couldn't restrain himself.

"I keep wanting to show my curiosity, Pavel Zakharovich . . . But somehow I feel embarrassed to ask . . ."

"Go ahead and show it."

"Where does your other half live?"

Liutov bent his head, looked at the driver in surprise, and smiled.

"So there . . . I knew it," Gafurov muttered in embarrassment. "I poked my nose in somebody else's business."

Liutov bent his head towards the glass, lit a cigarette, and only then did he answer, staring straight ahead:

"It's all simple, Moussah . . . I'm building a railroad and she's living in Vladivostok . . ."

"She didn't come?"

"She has her own view of life . . . You can't judge people for that."

"But what about love? There must be love? She should somehow, well, express it, shouldn't she?"

"There is always love in each one of us . . . Now you love the warmth, the sun, springtime greenery, a good book, your mother and sisters . . ."

"That's not what I mean, Pavel Zakharovich."

Liutov was silent, screwing up his eyes, and answered unwillingly:

"Sometimes feelings and interests converge. Or, to be more exact, diverge . . . I built a road on Primorie for three years. I sent money, came myself once a quarter. I asked her to join me—she didn't come. But I couldn't remain without work . . ."

"Of course! It's like a bird without his song!"

Liutov grew silent and, from the tone of his last words, Gafurov understood that it would last a long time.

Liutov thought of Buryanov and his crew, working these hours in the wind and frost. "Where is he now, on what picket?" thought Liutov and, shutting his eyes, he pictured the line, the railroad bed, and the people in the projector's rays—what he had seen several hours ago. And again fury awoke in him at all "special" circumstances, at difficult cuttings, slowly progressing bridges, shortages of materials, and machine breakages—at everything which forced them to make detour maneuvers, to give difficult orders and demand that people do the virtually impossible. But this same furious resentment forced him to glance a bit beyond tomorrow, to aim at the future—his train's work on another division of Great BAM. Liutov didn't know where they would put the train. Maybe somewhere in the Charsky sector, and maybe closer to the Yakut Berkakit. But the main thing was that when laying stakes in a new place he would, of course, take his past experience into account, and he would be able to imagine the total development of the work in its necessary and strict sequence. By that time a great deal should come right and become more clearly defined.

Liutov stirred, sat down more comfortably, and sighed.

In the future everything seemed better, brighter. But it was somewhere in front of them, still far away, and today he felt oppressed because people were working the night before the holiday. He felt oppressed, although he knew that without what was being done today they wouldn't move forward and reach better times...

And so they drove... Silently, each engrossed in his own thoughts. Only at the entrance to the settlement did Gafurov ask:

"Straight to the route?"

"Turn off to the office..."

Going through the still, deserted streets of the settlement, Gafurov remarked wearily:

"Not a single window is lit... The Slavs are snoozing." Stopping the car at the office door, he asked: "Do I have time to run for fuel?"

"Just make it snappy..."

At the knock at the door Fedor Lukyanovich Lukyanov, also dressed in a sheepskin coat and with the same tired face as the chief's, came out into the corridor to greet Liutov.

Liutov wasn't surprised by the meeting. Lukyanovich, as this man was called in the administration, was his deputy in charge of personnel and living conditions, but he also had the nerve-racking job of secretary of the train's Party branch.

Lukyanov was the oldest of the administrators, he had fought at the front and his body was scarred by shell fragments. Before his transfer to the office, he had worked for many years on excavators, drove heavy trucks, and later commanded a brigade and a maintenance division. And, as they say, he was at home everywhere.

To work with people it isn't enough to be a good specialist. And it's hard to say what helped Lukyanovich... He managed, apparently, because the life and activities of those surrounding him were always part of his own life, he had no concerns except those of the people surrounding him. Even if a person met Lukyanovich only once, he remembered his special thoughtfulness, kindness, and practical wisdom. People understood intuitively that this old man with his deep wrinkles and large, heavy hands knew

their blunders and weakness, but grasped the cause with a kindly smile, and his experience and good sense were always ready to help, whether with a stern word, practical advice, or compulsory requirement.

Liutov noticed on numerous occasions that he himself felt more confident with Lukyanovich. And he was struck by the fact that the apparently unhurried Lukyanovich seemed to do nothing to justify such confidence. But Liutov, like the others, had gotten used to the Party secretary's presence among the men during difficult days and hours, introducing to the course of the work something of his own, just what was needed at the moment. And this ability of Lukyanovich aroused quiet amazement in Liutov's soul.

After shaking the Party secretary's hand, he went to his office, wearily sank into a chair, and asked:

"You've probably been on the line?"

"Yes, I returned a quarter of an hour ago."

Lukyanovich also seated himself on the edge of the table, opposite Liutov, and, glancing into his face, became anxious:

"Hey, are you all right, fellow? How are Buryanov's men doing?"

"The crew is raging . . . Meeting the wind halfway. When I left they were finishing the sixth picket of the hundred and third."

"The sixth?" Liutov pictured the division. "That means they've come out on the curve?"

"They were just beginning it . . ."

"Is the track-laying machine moving?"

"So far they're warming it and it's moving. Buryanov says they've already burned a barrel of diesel oil . . . Oh yes, right before your arrival someone called from the station. The 'rotator' with the packets is approaching. And the watchwoman left this . . ."

Taking the sheet of paper from the Party secretary, Liutov began to decipher the scribbled words with amazement: "Ditur monuver oproofed by Moscow. Go ahead, Liutov." He reread the message and, deciphering its meaning, sighed in relief and smiled. Moscow had confirmed their version of the detour! It had approved, lifting the

weight which had pressed on Liutov and Buryanov, and justifying each man's labor. The thousands which they had taken from the millions were not spent in vain, the fourteen mile detour was recognized as essential, and now had a lawful right to its temporary existence.

"Good news?" Lukyanovich smiled. "Now that *he* has called all we have to do is press on to the end..."

Lukyanovich was silent a moment, looking over the papers piled on his desk.

"Now I've been thinking over an 'extra'. I'm thinking of rousing our editor-artist in a little while and putting out a special 'extra' edition. In three copies. We'll hang one by the canteen, one in the club, and definitely put one by the Board of Honor..."

Stretching out his legs, Liutov nodded silently. Remembering, he asked:

"How did the celebration go?"

"Just fine, according to the program... After the opening ceremony, there was a concert and then dancing began. There were no incidents. The policeman was so bored he played ping-pong all evening. Are you about to call *him*?"

"Why should I now? I will, later, when everything is finished."

In the dawn grayness coming through the window a car's headlights flashed by, and Liutov got up from the chair.

"Lukyanovich, please look in at the canteen," he asked. "I warned the head about dinner, but check just in case. If you have to, get the whole Supply Section on its feet. So the table will be set for Buryanov's whole crew by eleven. Tell them to put out their best service—on a level with the Golden Horn Restaurant!" When he had already stepped into the corridor he turned. "Yes, send a bus to the route after ten. And make sure it's the bus, and not some ordinary truck!"

"All right, all right, Zakharovich. Run off, since you're so impatient."

But Liutov didn't hear the old man's words. Slamming the door, he approached the car with fast, fresh steps, which didn't escape Gafurov's notice.

"Good news, Pavel Zakharovich?" he asked with interest. "Have they forked out a bonus for the train?"

"They've forked out more than a bonus, Gafurovich..."

Gafurov looked at the chief's face and didn't understand anything, but didn't start going into details.

When he had passed the next turn, Gafurov steered the car sharply downhill, along the fresh caterpillar track made by the bulldozer. Yesterday a road still passed here along the old railroad bed. Today it was carrying out its original function, and apparently old man Egorov was worried about drivers and had provided them with a new exit from the line.

While driving up, when still far away, Liutov saw the "rotator" with the packets of links approaching the track-laying machine, and recalled Stebenkov's obstinate face...

When Liutov arrived, Buryanov's men were finishing the curve and progressing towards the junction point with the projected course. Just as yesterday on the railroad bed, the bulldozer with its snow-covered cab rattled in front of the track-laying machine, and, further behind it, already close now, the post marked hundred and third kilometer stuck up.

People with torches in their hands were swarming near the track-laying machine—they were warming the axle boxes and working units of the immense machine, at the same time cursing those who had thought of sending the southern version to BAM. The excellent compact unit with its tracks and improved steering had already entered the cold weather, it was too late to change the oil and equipment, and besides, there was no time, and now in the hard frost the machine had begun to freeze: without being warmed, its motors refused to move its massive bulk.

The torches fastened on sticks were smoking, and by the end of the difficult shift the fitters were covered with soot, their eyelashes and brows scorched and holes burnt in their clothing. Liutov could not immediately recognize the workers whom, it seems, he had sent quite recently to the line. They were so different from the way they were yesterday, when they had talked with him in the crowded mobile home. He saw their darkened faces, weather-beaten, scorched by the cold and fire, the fresh spots on their frost-bitten cheeks, their parched lips.

The fitters joined the next link. Two of them grabbed a rail and dragged it forward. When he saw Liutov on the

railroad bed, one of them turned to him, throwing up his hand in its broad mitten:

"To the chief—a pioneer's greeting!"

Only then did Liutov recognize Korzinkin by his smile and voice.

The foreman himself was standing in front of the track-laying machine's arm, his back to the wind. Buryanov's nose was completely red, his cheeks were overgrown with bristles, and a solid layer of frost covered the front of his coat, but he looked at the chief with unconcealed glee, and every feature of his face, every gesture, said: "We made it! Do you see?!"

Buryanov wanted to say something, but the machine operator offered the next link. Sliding down from the rollers, it moved forward and began swinging on the cables. Obeying Buryanov's command, the operator slowly lowered the lash, and when it was half a meter from the ground, the fitters approached. Grasping the rails, their feet stuck in the snow, they began to rock the seven-ton hulk, listening to the foreman.

"Give it a push, boys, give it a push!" Buryanov droned hoarsely, breathing out steam and not taking his eyes off the link. "One more time, once more! That's it!"

At the same instant the operator released the brake of the winch and, held in the right position, the link crashed on the rolled surface of the road bed. The snow screeched pitifully under the ties, the freed claws clanked.

"Did we hit it, foreman?" Gorikhvatko asked, getting up from his knees.

"Grab your crowbars, boys!" Buryanov hurried them all. "Let's adjust it a little..."

Crowbars in hand, the fitters ranged along the link, again looking at the foreman and listening to him. And Buryanov, walking unsteadily with the others, began playing a tune with a special rhythm:

"Musta-fa a road did build. Mustafa walked out on it..."

The link was moved to this unusual refrain, which guided the efforts of many hands, and its rails were finally joined in one line with the rails of the link which had been laid earlier, and was now pressed down by the multi-ton track-laying machine.

"O.K.!" Buryanov turned.

Korzinkin and the Komsomol secretary Sotov were waiting for this command by the end of the link. Swinging the heavy connecting rail with all four hands, they began to strike the rails with it. Fastened to the ties with spikes, the rails were displaced with great difficulty, each blow moving them only millimeters.

When the gap between the links had decreased to the necessary limit, Buryanov stopped the men. The elderly fitter with his conspicuous officer's cap, and his fellow worker put heavy brackets on the rails and began fastening them with bolts. Two men headed by Tsitnadze were busy at the second joint. The remaining fitters, scattered along the link, were knocking together anti-theft devices, moving ties according to markings, driving in spikes.

The men had barely managed this work when Buryanov again raised his hand, and his hoarse "Get moving!" resounded above the snowy plane.

Submitting to human will, the track-laying machine moved from the spot. Its wheels, as if groping for support, cautiously rolled across the new joint and with all its might the immense machine pressed the bars of the ties, black from impregnation, into the dense snow.

During this brief moment when the machine was being moved, the fitters working below could wipe off their sweat, exchange a few words, move the instrument. Liutov stepped towards Buryanov and greeted him, asking:

"Did you decide to finish during your shift?"

"Some of the boys came during the night," Buryanov answered. "Together with Lukyanovich... Now we're putting in substitutes at the torches and taking turns warming up."

"And now the record is ours!" the Georgian walked by, his eyes flashing. "Now we're not afraid, Pavel Zakharovich!"

"Say 'hup' when you've jumped up to the mark!" Buryanov smiled and asked Liutov: "Are you going to lead them farther yourself?"

Nodding, Liutov went out to the track-laying machine. It had stopped rattling on its rollers and was already lowering the next link towards the railroad bed. Now the hands

of the crew, obeying the commands and gestures of the train chief, again seized it. Screwing up his eyes, Liutov determined the invisible axial marking of the road in the radius of the rocking and, having grasped it, he shouted abruptly like Buryanov:

"That's it!"

The link plopped on the snowy ground, and again people got busy around it. Each did his work with a speed and violent effort which suggested their common desire to reach the cherished post at the beginning of the hundred and third kilometer as quickly as possible.

A chilly sun rose unwillingly above the hills. The wind kept on bending the sparse shrubs, tearing the yellow needles from the larches, driving the blizzard into snow drifts, deflecting people's voices, the screech of the rollers and winches, the strained hum of the motors. The crow-bars drove into the frozen railroad bed, the earth gave a muffled sigh under the fallen link, hammers knocked, and, repeating the foreman's words, Liutov kept saying:

"Give it a push, boys, give it a push!"

Leading the track-laying machine, he saw in action each of Buryanov's men, on whom time and the accurate execution of his commands depended... Swift Tsitnadze appeared both above, slinging the links, and below. Even beneath his warm clothes the willowy liteness of one born in a sun-warmed land could be sensed.

Mimicking the foreman, or perhaps simply mumbling the words about Mustafa which had stuck in his mind, Korzinkin was whirling amidst his comrades. Hoarfrost had whitened Korzinkin's side whiskers, now not at all vivid or conspicuous.

...The familiar faces of people united by their work and goal, their rhythm and intensity controlled by their special upsurge, flashed before Liutov. Like him, they were warmed and urged on by the feeling of imminent victory. It was necessary and near, and, imperceptible to Liutov himself, Buryanov's confidence was reflected in his own movements and features.

Liutov did not notice the bus drive up. He was amazed when he saw the correspondent suddenly appear out of nowhere. Then he noticed Lukyanovich and Gafurov among

the fitters, crowbars in hand. When old man Egorov's bulldozer appeared under the slope, its caterpillars pulverizing the snow, and came towards the auto road, he looked around. The yellowish, crudely finished post with "103" crookedly stensilled on it stuck up right next to him.

The last meters remained. After throwing their hissing torches into the snow, all the other fitters joined in a common chain of workers. Even the track-laying machine operator, jumping up from his seat, pressed into the crowd, nudging the others and grabbing two crowbars at once.

Liutov, chilled to the bone, also wanted to join in a single rank with the crew. But standing alone on the raised railroad bed, he could scarcely conceal his joy, feeling with all his heart that for the sake of this moment it was worth going through the past night.

When the next link hung over the division boundary, Buryanov jumped out from behind the track-laying machine.

"Pavel Zakharovich! Let me place the last one?!"

Buryanov asked, but his eyes and voice demanded what belonged to him, what he deserved. Understanding the foreman, Liutov moved aside.

Buryanov, concentrating intensely, with the usual waving of hands and in the same voice, hoarse from a cold, laid the last link, covering the unmarked boundary. But when the link was joined, he again raised his hand, ordering the track-laying machine to move forward.

"This is neither one thing nor the other!" the foreman's weatherbeaten lips smiled. "Just so there won't be any doubt, let's go a little farther!"

For the first time during the past day, it seems, Liutov responded with a vague movement of his shoulders. If the tired fitters, having reached the mark, had now thrown down their instrument, uttering a concluding "basta!" he couldn't have demanded any more from them. Their supply of strength was totally spent, had been stretched to the limit... But nobody grumbled against the foreman's desire, and the line extended another twenty five meters.

When the track-laying machine stopped at the last link, Korzinkin, looking at the road bed disappearing in the distance, muttered:

"What neighbors we have... They didn't even meet us with a brass band or send a representative with a flag."

"They're on a spree, the devils!" Gorikhvatko smiled, still holding his hammer in his hands.

Sotov and the elderly fitter dragged the connecting rail up to the track-laying machine and let out their breath:

"That's all, pals!"

With these softly uttered words the long hours of difficult assault came to an end. Now, far away from the track laying, on dozens of maps, people could continue the red line indicating the existing route. And the day is not far off when the first freight train will arrive at Tynda. Along the line, on the wires, the report of the completion of the plan could start moving, and the boys who did this work took off their caps, wiped their wet foreheads with them, and brushed the hoarifrost off their lashes. They knocked the snow off their clothes, and steam, blown off by the wind, smoked over their heads. With fingers trembling from recent tension they got cigarettes and lit them, inhaling hungrily.

Looking at the crew, which had become closer to him, Liutov wanted to say some special words to these fellows, but just as yesterday in the mobile home, he couldn't find the words at once and frowned, knitting his brows. Lukanovich came to his rescue.

"Let's get into the bus, comrades. After such work you can catch cold in a jiffy. And we have to move the road still farther... Let's go right to the canteen. The tables are already set for you."

After they had taken the instrument to the heated enclosure, the crew hurried to the bus. Korzinkin squeezed into the door last and, falling on someone's knees, sang half-wittedly:

"Coachma-an, drive the horses!"

The bus was already turning towards the line when Liutov opened the door of his car. Inside, his hands stretched towards the heater, the correspondent was warming up. Having nodded to him, Liutov sat down, trying to hold himself especially straight. He was simply afraid that if he sat more comfortably he would fall asleep before reaching the settlement. He suddenly felt an insuperable weak-

ness in every cell of his body. Without turning around, he asked:

"Well, comrade from the press, will you have your article?"

"Yes, I will, Pavel Zakharovich," the correspondent became animated. "Only... Can I ask you something, Pavel Zakharovich?... It's very important to me."

"What interests you?"

"I would like... how can I explain it to you?... I'm interested in what you, as a man and a leader, are experiencing during these first minutes after such a victory?"

Liutov looked at the correspondent, at Gafurov, who was steering silently and thoughtfully, and, staring ahead, opened his parched lips with difficulty.

"If it's really so important... I'd like to bury my nose in a pillow..."

The road flying under the car rose before his eyes...

VLADIMIR MIRNEV was born in the village of Kutuzovka, Omsk Region, in 1937. After the death of his father, the family moved to the Kurgai mine in the Dzhambul Region (Kazakhstan), where he finished school and began working as a builder of mountain roads. In 1959 he entered the Russian Language and Literature department at the Moscow Teachers' Training Institute. After graduation he was a teacher for ten years and then an editor at the Sovremennik Publishing House.

His first collected stories *The Fast Train*, came out in 1973. Vladimir Mirnev is today one of the most prolific young writers: over the past four years three of his books have been published—*The Drastic Month*, *The Green Roof* and *A Simple Feeling*.

Vladimir Mirnev

FIRST TIME
in MOSCOW

I

It was twilight when the train approached the city. Viktor Salasov pressed against the window, trying to make something out through the murky glass, but it was twilight and, although lights were burning on the suburban platforms, nothing could be seen. The silhouettes of houses, cranes, and massive buildings swam by, patches of woods and misty islets of fields flashed past—and then houses once again . . .

This was Salasov's first trip to Moscow, and he didn't even want to consider that these little wooden houses, groves, and wheat and cabbage fields were the beginning of Moscow. Long ago he had decided to come to Moscow after demobilization and here he was . . .

"Get ready!" his friend Zhenka Pataev shouted. "Here we are. We'll get on a bus and head for my house."

Salasov felt that something had come to pass in his life. But what was it?

Here the train stopped.

He slowly got ready, tightened the belt on his soldier's shirt, glanced once more at the window through which he hadn't seen anything, and headed for the exit.

The car emptied out.

"Are we in Moscow already?" Salasov asked the conductor, who raised his sleepy, lazy face towards him and shrugged his shoulders.

The passengers filled the platform and hurried to the station-building.

"We're here," Pataev sighed in relief and lit a cigarette. "How many times have you been in our capital, Moscow?"

"Not once."

"Not at all?"

"I've never even come close. This is my first time."

"Well, my dear friend..." Pataev sighed and looked at Viktor closely, as if he was trying to determine whether he was lying. "Well, my dear friend... You have to spend some time in Moscow."

Pataev grabbed his suitcase and headed for the station. Victor hurried, afraid of being left behind, and kept trying to walk next to him, but couldn't manage it: time and again he collided with passers-by and was jostled.

"Let's drop in and celebrate our arrival," said Zhenka, and headed for the buffet. "Take off your shoulder-straps, or else we'll have a drink and land right in the guard-house. As easy as that."

They each drank a glass of wine and ate some liver sausage. Salasov began to cough. The wine was warm and bitter.

"For three years we should have three drinks," Zhenka burst out laughing.

"No, not me. Later."

He looked at everything around him and was amazed. He thought he would see something that would dumbfound him completely, and then everywhere things would be unusually fine,—but people were scurrying back and forth and couldn't care less about two demobilized fellows standing by the buffet.

They were the only ones who got on the bus. Salasov immediately stared out the window and tried to understand... To understand himself or to see something through

the window? Inside himself something grew tense with expectation.

The yellow light of the streetlamps flooded the streets, lanes, and squares, and there were many people around. The bus turned onto another street, then turned again and again, and suddenly stopped; Pataev shouted out at once:

"Let's go, you dope! Halt! It's our stop!"

Salasov jumped off the bus behind Pataev. They entered an old house, climbed the stairs, and Pataev rang. A little, hunched old lady opened the door and asked distinctly:

"Who do you want?"

"Who, we? Nobody. We've been just demobed," Zhenka burst out laughing. "Don't you recognize me, Gramma?!"

"How do you expect me to know all of you?" the old woman answered staidly. "You can't remember everybody. I'm old. You can't remember everybody, my dear."

"Our neighbor," Zhenka nodded at the old lady as she walked off.

"Aha," Salasov took a deep breath.

Zhenka stamped loudly along the wooden floor of the long, narrow corridor, opened the leatherette-covered door at the end, and voices could immediately be heard, the bright light and smell of smoked sausage and cucumbers wafted from the room.

"We were waiting," said a short woman of about fifty in a black dress, who was standing in the doorway. She was staring at Zhenka joyously and crying. "Well, Papa, congratulate Evgeni on his return. We were waiting. As soon as the postman brought the telegram, we bought everything, cooked it all, and began to wait. Inna, has he changed?" she addressed a tall girl who was standing next to her. "Oh, you're not alone? Are you with him?" the woman addressed Salasov.

He nodded and stepped forward, wanting to say something, but all he could utter was: "But."

"And where do you live?" she asked, looking at her son and then at Salasov, as if comparing them.

"I'm from Omsk. The Omsk region," he answered quickly. He then straightened his hair, put his suitcase on the floor, and sighed. "So..."

"Well then," the woman said, "come in. Did you serve with Evgeni?"

"In the same unit . . . the same battery."

"Were you also summoned from an institute?" she asked, closely scrutinizing his face. "Do you also want to study?"

He raised his eyes and saw the woman's broad, white face with its fine wrinkles, and her guarded, small gray eyes, framed with short sparse lashes.

"Well then . . ." she said once more, and Salasov couldn't understand what she meant, and suddenly out of the blue he perched himself on his suitcase.

"Let me introduce you," Zhenka suggested. "And stand up, Vitek. This is my sister Inka, and this is Ilya Savelievich, also a relative—a father, after all, is related. Understand? And my mother, who might just start sobbing, or might start thinking and wondering—Maria Afanasievna. Understand? Or not? And now let's drink! Just a little bit, of course. Inka, bring on the snacks."

"I see you've already had something to drink," Maria Afanasievna said slowly.

"That's my personal business," Zhenka answered. "And on your part it's a breach of my sovereignty. I'm a diplomat, Father, right?"

"You didn't even approach your father," Ilya Savelievich went towards his son. He somehow jerked strangely: when he moved, his corpulent body stooped forward and, making a semicircle, straightened out again. Coming up to his son, he stopped, embraced him, and kissed him three times. Salasov noticed that he had a wooden leg. "Well, let's kiss—I'm not ashamed to kiss my son. What is there to be ashamed about?" he asked. "I kiss my son, but not my wife. I'm ashamed with my wife, but not with my son." He stood and spoke, and then unexpectedly went out to the corridor.

"Innochka, look after your father," Maria Afanasievna said.

Inna went out to the corridor, and Zhenka followed her.

Maria Afanasievna placed wine and water glasses, plates of sliced sausage, bread, and drinks on the table. Victor looked at the woman and began to feel uncomfortable. He felt that way because he was sitting among strangers,

people he didn't know at all, who had their own interests and problems, and, as it seemed to him, he was constraining them.

The room where he found himself was large, with a window and a balcony; there was a bed, a sideboard, a piano and sofa-bed, a television set, and a quantity of other necessary and, as usual, unnecessary things; a new chandelier, bought specially to mark their son's return, burned brightly.

It was quiet in the room, so quiet that Salasov became uneasy. He suddenly understood clearly: he had to leave: he picked up his suitcase, thought for a moment, and opened the door. The woman didn't pay any attention to him. In the corridor he stumbled against something, and his suitcase loudly crashed to the floor.

"What's the matter, have you lost your wits?" Zhenka, who appeared, said loudly. "Where are you off to, you dope?"

"I'll wait at the station," Salasov answered guiltily. He blushed. They had invited him, and he was about to run away like a thief, cautiously, stealthily, not saying goodbye to anyone. He was ashamed to leave, but now he was also ashamed to return. He stood indecisively in the corridor and stared at the floor like a schoolboy who had done something wrong.

"Let's go back," Zhenka said, "don't play the fool! Do you want to insult my father?"

"But he didn't even say hello to me," Salasov said unexpectedly.

"Let's go back," Zhenka repeated, took the suitcase, and carried it into the room." "What a jerk! Caprice is a bad thing. Let's go get washed. And don't be shy, you didn't scare anyone, although you're a regular hippo."

For the first moments they sat silently at the table. Maria Afanasievna often got up, brought what was needed, and sat down, closely examining how much lay on each one's plate—it seemed this was all that interested her.

Salasov, bending low over the table, looked around at the others from under his brow. They had a drink and then another... Ilya Savelievich looked at all of them and again poured a drink for himself.

"Oh, the young!" he said and drank. "Oh, the young!"

"We're all right," Zhenka answered. "Inna, are you also young? Doesn't Ilya Savelievich consider himself young? You're two years and three months younger than we are."

"Here they went bang-bang for three years and do they say anything about it?—No, not a word. They're silent. What's good about being silent, young fellows? And there was a time, earlier, when we . . . But why do I bring that up? It's all right for your friend, Evgeni, embarrassment is written all over him, but you—you're not one to take a back seat. You're a hero! Why not . . ."

Ilya Savelievich unfastened his shirt collar and got up from the table.

"Inna, why don't you at least put on a record, so we can have some music," he reproached his daughter, and went around the table. "Evgeni was born right before the war." He stopped by Salasov: "And what about you?"

"In nineteen forty one," Salasov said and fell silent. He suddenly understood that he couldn't keep up the conversation. What could he talk about? He thought that everything he formely considered worthwhile and serious would seem stupid and ridiculous here. Why was the girl silent? She gave him a fleeting glance from time to time, and her small eyes, just like her mother's, expressed condemnation. But what could she condemn him for?

Salasov bent over the table as if to take some bread, but looked at Inna. She was slender. Her silence and concentration frightened him. "Looks like she's very clever," he thought. Inna bent under the table for some reason, and then, glancing at him, she saw that he . . . was looking at her. Salasov began fidgeting in his chair, and right then decided that he would leave in less than a minute.

"I fought in the war for a year and a half, and lost my leg," Ilya Savelievich continued. "I came back without a leg. But I still got a daughter. I was lucky! That's what it means to be lucky! That's the kind of wife I have! And my daughter, Vitya, received a medal at school. My word of honor! A gold medal! And how did you do at school?"

"I graduated without a medal."

"And how many children did your mama have?"

"My mama?" Salasov asked. He was ashamed to say

that there were ten children in their family and that his mother was given a Mother Heroine Order, because he had suddenly come to believe that a large family was not so admirable, and that his mother's decoration was not worth anything. "There are three of us—two sons and a daughter," Salasov lied.

"My mother had thirteen children," Ilya Savelievich continued. "Seven of them died. Nowadays people don't raise such families. They have small ones. I think it's too bad. It's a great loss for the country."

"Let's drink one more," Zhenka whispered. "Vitek, drink that we'll remember this day. I give my word—I'm going to get good and drunk! That will be splendid. Honestly! Ilya Savelievich loves to blather on about life. Well, let him go to the hairy devil. Shall we drink? One poet said something wonderful on the subject. Only I don't remember what he said, but I know it was truly wonderful."

"I was so worried about you when war almost broke out," Ilya Savelievich said. "How worried I was..."

"That's to your credit," said Zhenka. "You display merit on this account, Father. War at the contemporary stage is—you yourself know what; understand? That's it. Our heart isn't made of iron either. You understand us, don't you? Let's drink to that 'understanding'! Everyone's drinking, everyone's drinking, everyone's shouting 'Hura-a-ah!' We have technology! Division! Aim zero-zero, level zero-zero, what's the charge?"

The door opened and the old lady came into the room, stopped by the table, and smiled at something joyously, almost rapturously.

"Who are your guests?" she asked. "Who has brought such merriment? Mariika, Iliushechka, why are you drinking?"

"Our son has turned up from the armed services!" Ilya Savelievich reported loudly. "Our son! From the armed services!"

"Your son? Zhenechka? But when did he turn up? And where is he? Oh, my, he's come from the army! What a happy event! And I prayed for him, I prayed."

"You opened the door for us, Gramma," Zhenka said. "You opened the door, and you barely recognized us. You've gone totally deaf, my old lady!"

"It means happiness, it's good sign. I'll drink to him. Come on, pour me just a drop, Iliushechka! Do you think I won't drink? Why, I'll drink to his health. I'll drink. At my age my hearing has gotten very bad. I hear the bell, I'm used to it, but I hear very little besides. Oh, how little... And is this his friend? My, oh my, what a boy! How handsome they are! The old woman embraced Zhenka and gave him a smacking kiss on the lips, then she kissed Salasov on the lips, drank a little glass of vodka, stood for a moment, and no matter how much Ilya Savelievich begged her to stay, she left.

"What an old lady!" Ilya Savelievich said. "She lives alone, although she had about seven children. Four perished during the war, one drowned, one died a natural death, and another one disappeared. There's been no news from him for ten years now, the devil. We went to the police, she put a notice in the newspaper. There was one answer: there's no trace of him. The old lady is three hours short of eighty. What an old lady!" he shook his head. "I can't talk about her calmly. She's heroic, you might say. Excuse me, please. What character! There isn't another like hers in Moscow. The main thing in a man is his character. Am I telling the truth, Evgeni?

"That's to your credit, Evgeni mumbled through his drowsiness. His face broke into a blissful smile; once in a while, not opening his eyes, still smiling blissfully, he would stretch out his hand and grope on the table for a piece of bread, put it in his mouth, and chew slowly, the smile not leaving his face. "Formally speaking, that's to your credit, Ilya Savelievich. Ask Vitek. Isn't it so, Vitek? I have enormous experience. Isn't it so, Vitek?"

Evgeni stopped mumbling. Salasov looked from time to time at Inna and Maria Atanasievna, and his eyes gleamed with curiosity. What kind of people were they? Interesting or not? How do you get to know a person? Each one sits in front of you and eats and drinks. Salasov looked at Inna. Little pale yellow curls, apparently dyed, hung down her cheeks. She was silent all evening, not uttering a single word, and this surprised Salasov and put him on his guard.

"It's time for me to go," Salasov said, and, standing up

with the decisiveness of a person who is finally about to leave, he headed for the exit.

Ilya Savelievich began blinking guiltily:

"Where will you go? Evgeni, do you hear? Viktor is about to leave. I hope we didn't offend you? If anything is wrong excuse us a thousand times, but please don't offend us."

At home he would have already walked about the yard or sat outside in the dark and told his mother about the army service, and his mother would have asked him to repeat something once in a while, would be astonished, and then would get in two or three words about his childhood. "You began school when you were eight, you know, and only afterwards you grew strong," mother would say, and would sigh softly, imperceptibly moving towards him in the dark, striving to touch her son.

"We didn't offend you, but you, it turns out are offending us?" Ilya Savelievich asked.

Salasov was tall and thin, with light brown hair; his hair set off his yellowish, thin face, drawn over broad cheekbones. He wanted to smile and say something cheerful, but nothing appropriate. Ilya Savelievich took away his suitcase and stroked Salasov's hair.

"Why, my dear boy, what for? Sit down. We'll watch television. Everything here is simple. Excuse us, we're simple people, workers, and mother—mother is also of simple origin, although you would think by her looks that she was no less than a general's wife. Only Inna is studying at an institute."

"She's a student, that's why she looks so clever," thought Salasov and sat down on the chair.

An hour later Inna left. Salasov watched television, glancing from time to time at Zhenka, sleeping at the table, and suddenly smelled something light and pleasant.

"Do I smell flowers?" he asked.

"We opened the balcony door—there are apples lying there," Ilya Savelievich answered. "Early, marvellous apples. Do you want one?"

Rhythmic, dense street noises entered the room alone with smells, and floated through it. Sitting in an armchair, Salasov began to fall asleep.

II

He woke up early. The whole room was sparkling with sunshine, which had burst right through the window; blinding rays spattered in all directions from the glass sideboard and the tumblers, carafes, wine glasses and plates within it; the floor, thickly painted in brown and varnished, also scattered many specks on the ceiling.

Neither Ilya Savelievich nor Maria Afanasievna were there.

"Now we can sleep as much as we like," Salasov said. "No one will shout: 'Battery, reveille! Get in formation! Each platoon in two columns—fall in!'"

He stretched out pleasantly. Zhenka was lying next to him and snoring. They should get up. He woke Zhenka up. The latter opened his eyes, looked around for a long time, and then shouted for all he was worth:

"Sergeant-major! Blast you, why didn't you wake us up?! Ah! Ha ha! This is the life. The bugle's reveille is mute. Well, Vitek, aren't we living in clover? Can't we snooze a little longer? Sleep, preserve your health! 'Peace of mind above all.' Who said that? Raykin. He understands a thing or two."

"It's time to get up." Salasov looked at the clock. It was already eight o'clock. "Where are your parents?"

"They trudge off to work, where else could they be? Labor created man, and they are perfecting themselves. Sharpening their intellect through labor. There should be a note on the table, go ahead and look. There it is! Come on, toss it this way..."

Salasov gave him the note, made a few perfunctory physical jerks and quickly got dressed.

"Vitek, they give us permission to have a drink!" Zhenka shouted. "Hurra-al!"

The old lady glanced into the room, crossed herself, and stared at Zhenka.

"Grandma Marfa, excuse me, sinner that I am, I was noisy, I won't conceal it!" he shouted. "But you're deaf, aren't you? In the army I never got up at eight o'clock.—But now— isn't it something! You can grab a tiger by the tail!"

"What's going on here, my dear boys?" the old lady asked, not having made out what Zhenka had jabbered to her. "What a racket I heard. And I thought: why do I hear it? Because it must be very noisy, that's why. At first I couldn't understand where it was from. Where could it be coming from, I said. At first I couldn't understand, but then I understood."

"You understood?" Zhenka burst out. "Grandma Marfa understood. A historical fact! We'll go and tell Julius Caesar, the devil take him: grandma Marfa understood."

The old lady didn't hear anything, but looked attentively at Zhenka with unblinking, tearful eyes—small, hunched, with sunken, blackened lips. She was wearing a new skirt with a bright flower pattern and a small apron sewn right on the front.

Zhenka waved his arms and jumped down on the floor.

"Oh, the rascal!" the old woman exclaimed. "He's not ashamed, he's not at all afraid of me, the rascal! This is for you." She raised her arm, as if wishing to spank him, and went towards him. Zhenka leaped on the bed and hastily put on his pants. "I'll give you a spanking," the old lady burst out laughing, breathing heavily. "What a spanking I'll give you!..."

"Sit down, Grandma," said Salasov, seeing how quickly she became tired. "Right here on the chair."

"What?" the old lady didn't understand. "What?" she asked loudly in a hoarse voice.

"Sit down!"

She sat down at once, sat a little while, and then left.

"The first exam at the university is the day after tomorrow," said Salasov, and his own words sounded strange to him. "I'm not ready. The exam is the day after tomorrow, and I'm not ready. I'll get a low grade. What do you think?"

"You're better off not thinking about it, Vitek. I also have an exam. You know how it is? It's believed that happiness comes suddenly, unexpectedly. It's a historical fact."

"Let's go brush our teeth," Salasov proposed, getting a towel, soap, and a toothbrush from his suitcase.

"I've decided to do away with that stuff for the time

being, Vitek. Toothbrush, toothpaste, all of life's petty trifles. Man's teeth are so made that they don't have to be cleaned. I'm telling you. People didn't brush their teeth in olden times, and you'd be lucky to have such fangs! It's a historical fact!"

...On the way to the university Salasov was all eyes: he observed the sun-dappled houses, old and new, the red islands of tulips shimmering in the public gardens; the heavy smell of linden trees wafted through the streets, and everywhere people were hurrying, running—in crowds, in pairs, and alone. Anxiety showed on all the faces, and hope for something, and the secret thought that he would manage to enroll in the university gripped Salasov.

"This is what you have to do," Zhenka said. "Be careful you don't slip up on the exams. Listen, why didn't you enroll in the literature institute?"

"I didn't pass the competition," Salasov answered gloomily. As soon as Pataev asked him, his hope to be admitted melted away, and he decided that it would be almost impossible to enrol in the university, that there would be stiff competition. "You're enrolling in the chemistry department?" He was sure of Zhenka.

"Inka is studying chemistry. She's in her fourth year. She'll give me a nudge."

"Why did you decide on chemistry? Earlier you wanted to enroll in the communications institute."

"Well, brother Salasov, you have to understand the situation. Chemistry is in fashion and, consequently, is in high esteem. After the institute, they'll take me wherever I like, lock, stock, and barrel. Fashion is a great thing. Fashion is a gust of life's wind, and that gust can be sharper than a hurricane. It's a historical fact!"

"Maybe," Salasov answered. "Maybe it's so." He thought how well and even beautifully Zhenka spoke and that he himself could scarcely come out with. "Fashion is a gust of life's wind." Now more than ever Salasov felt incapable of enrolling in the university.

"That's where we're going," Pataev pointed from a small garden which turned off towards the university. "That's the old building. Here's where your philology department is."

Salasov's heart stood still, and in an instant his lips grew dry. They entered the courtyard; there were maples and lindens, flower beds struck the eye, and under the trees small groups of fellows and girls were sitting on benches and laughing amicably. Salasov looked around, trying to understand why they were laughing, but there was no apparent reason. All the fellows were young, only two soldiers were sitting at the edge of a bench under a maple and anxiously exchanging remarks.

"They're our people," said Zhenka, noticing the soldiers. "Let's go over to them. They understand the essence of a tense situation."

When Salasov and Pataev approached the soldiers became silent.

"Hi, old timers!" shouted Pataev, and stretched his hand to each of them in turn. "Hi, old timers! How are we doing? How are things brewing?"

"Fine," answered a red-headed, freckled fellow. He was tall, judging by his long legs, stretched out far.

"We're preparing for the exams?" Zhenka asked.

"Yes, we're preparing," the redhead answered.

"Well, how goes it?"

"All right. So what?"

"Oh, nothing. This one here is going to take them with you. Have you got your cribs done? Why don't we get to know each other, boys? Somehow or other, we've all shared the same fate, after all. And fate, as Cicero said, is a turkey."

"Lobakov," one of them answered.

"Anatoli Khmara," the freckled one responded.

Zhenka gave his and Salasov's names.

"The main thing, guys, is not to spare our cribs, as the saying goes," Pataev said merrily, and everyone burst out laughing. "Cribs are number one. All great people admitted using cribs. Lomonosov, Pushkin, Lobachevsky, Einstein, and, they say, a few other great people who are thought about but not talked about. Do you agree? It's a historical fact!"

"We agree," Lobakov answered. "Julius Caesar mentions cribs, too, or spurs, as he calls them, cribaci."

"What did I say," Pataev burst out laughing. "He's the

clever one. What did I tell you! Love me, I'm a prophet in my own country, although, as everybody knows, no man is a prophet in his own country."

"Where are you enrolling?" Lobakov asked Pataev and, when he found out, he gave a whistle. "You're a fine one, I see! Are you both from Moscow?"

"I am, but he's from Siberia. Mother Siberia, land of the chosen people. All great Russian people, the cream of the nation, so to speak, lived there in their time. And that's where Vitek Salasov is from. A mighty mortal will emerge from him, just you wait. It's a historical fact!"

"Lay off," Salasov said, embarrassed. "What a loud-mouth."

"He writes poetry," Zhenka said and gave a loud laugh. "My word of honor! And long epic poems. The word of a musketeer!"

"Will you be living in the dormitory?" Khmara asked. He stood up and did indeed prove to be a very tall fellow. It could now be seen that he was not only tall, but thin and angular; he looked at Salasov with his sad, attentive eyes, and Salasov liked him immediately. He thought that he would get on well with this fellow. "Let's go, I'll show you where to sign up for a dormitory pass for the examination period," Khmara offered.

They went from one secretary to another, showing their army papers. Everything was accomplished quickly. Very quickly, even.

"One thing is accomplished," Khmara said. "You'll be living with us. All right?"

"I hope to come and see you in the dormitory. Am I invited, old timers?" Zhenka asked.

"Come over," Khmara answered, then sat down, crossed his legs, lit a cigarette, and began looking upwards, to make it clear that he had no intention of speaking, and even less of arguing. "A man who blows his nose loudly in public does not respect those around him," he said unexpectedly, continuing to look upward thoughtfully. "Not respecting others, he doesn't respect himself. It's a commonly known fact."

Here under the trees, near these fellows, Salasov felt calm. He tried to imagine lectures, conversations with

scholars (he had read about this, after all, in books), discussions among students, and himself, buried in books, in the deep, unfathomable thoughts of others.

"Shall we go to my institute?" Zhenka nudged him. "Everything is set for you here. Shall we take a ride to my institute? I have a rendez-vous with a certain fellow."

"Have you ever been on the subway?" Zhenka asked on the way to the subway.

Salasov hated to admit that in all his twenty two years he had only heard about the subway, and had only dreamed of seeing all these immense houses, trolleybuses, restaurants, the Kremlin; he was ashamed of himself, ashamed of his clothes, and of something else which he couldn't exactly put his finger on. But a moment later, forgetting everything on earth, he looked at the sparkling store windows, the glittering flow of cars, the people.

Near the Pushkin Monument Pataev sat on a bench and lit a cigarette.

"How long has the monument been here?" Salasov asked.

"How should I know! It's been here as long as I can remember. For a long time. It was set up back under the tsars; we live right next to it. Remember: everybody knows about monuments, galleries, museums except for Muscovites."

They got on the subway and arrived at the institute. Inna was sitting on a bench by the entrance to the institute, and was examining her coffee-colored shoes; a tall, very thin fellow in a knitted jacket was standing next to her.

Inna stood up impetuously and rushed to meet the boys.

"Couldn't you come any later?" she blurted out angrily, but, noticing Salasov, she was embarrassed for an instant. "I've been sitting like a complete idiot for a good three hours!"

Inna was wearing a gray jersey suit which tightly fitted her slender body; gray was very becoming to her. She was angry and didn't notice when Salasov said "Hello" to her, although she always tried to be extremely polite in all regards.

"Kirill, this is my brother."

"You might scream a bit more politely at your elders," Zhenka grumbled, offended, and offered the fellow his hand. "Evgeni, brother of the angry lady."

"Kirill Pulkherin," the fellow said simply. He was a head taller than Salasov, skinny, but with a small plump face; his head was small and his protruding ears were also small. He smiled and spoke in an unusually deep bass, with a vibrato.

"He should call you by your patronymic." Inna looked angrily at Evgeni. "He's an instructor at the institute. A candidate of sciences. Do you understand?"

"Well then, I'm Kirill Nikolaevich," the fellow continued, to satisfy her. "Kirill Nikolaevich Pulkherin.—Will you remember?"

Inna stood silently for a moment and then said:

"Oh, I forgot to introduce you. This is Evgeni's friend. They served together."

"Viktor!" Evgeni shouted. "He is Victor Salasov! Once he saved the life of a certain sad sack—it's true—he himself almost burned up. Imagine, a small projectile, this size, a hundred and ninety six kilograms in all, came down off the rails and fell, its powder had gotten damp. Understand, Inna? It fell fifty meters from the mounting, its detonating fuse in the ground, and lay smoking. Can you imagine, Inna? It's smoking. A soldier boy jumps out from his cover and goes towards the projectile... The lop-eared fool, you see, was interested in knowing why it fell, and he didn't understand that at any second it would explode. And would smash him to smithereens. It's a good thing Viktor caught up with him and knocked him down, but what went on then!... Imagine, Inna, a two-hundred kilogram projectile... Viktor has fragments in his fair body... And this was in peacetime."

"It happens," the candidate said without interest. "And you're all right?"

"Well, we fell in a trench," Salasov answered, embarrassed.

The candidate shook Salasov's hand. The candidate's hand was large, soft, and moist, he pressed Salasov's hand politely, bending slightly, and smiled, and Salasov's throat became parched and he began blinking quickly. "How sim-

ple it all is," he thought. "I've never seen a candidate of sciences, and now I've met one, on my second day here."

The candidate of sciences turned to Inna. Salasov looked him over closely from head to foot, and liked him: a young fellow, a few years older than he, and already a candidate. He must be intelligent! Otherwise he wouldn't be a candidate. There was one thing which Salasov just couldn't get straight: how did this fellow come to know so much in his twenty five years that they made him a candidate of sciences? Here he is, a candidate. And who is he, Salasov? Nobody. In the army he could operate a rocket-launcher, cannon, sub-machine gun, but here he couldn't do anything, didn't know anything, but this fellow must even have had a hand in the space satellites.

Salasov sat down on the bench and wanted to look the candidate in the face once more, supposing he would see something significant and intelligent that could never be seen in simple people.

The candidate turned around unexpectedly and looked at Salasov, then looked around again—Salasov didn't read anything in his face. The candidate had large, shiny blue eyes, very intelligent, it seems—that was all he saw.

Zhenka sat down next to him, lit a cigarette, looked absent-mindedly at Viktor, and smiled.

"A candidate. He's not a candidate, but a fop. Just look how he puts on airs! We did our duty in the service, while he, just look, became a candidate. The devil! 'My carriage, bring my carriage! I'll go and find a modest haven for outraged feelings.'"

"He's a good man," Salasov said to this.

"Who knows . . . But Inka behaves very strictly with him. Look—she's talking and that lop-eared guy is taking it all in. Let's go and eat something, and then it wouldn't be bad to go to a restaurant. Wouldn't it be great?"

When they were already on the street, Inna called out.

"Boys! Where are you going? I'm coming with you."

They waited for her.

"How do you like him?" she asked, out of breath, separated them and stood between them. "Is he all right? Only tell the truth!"

"Well, he's tall," Evgeni smiled. "They pulled him head and feet. They stretched him out over two meters."

"He's a meter ninety six. Viktor, how do you regard him? What did you find in him? You, a man unspoiled by civilization?"

She burst out laughing nervously; it was apparent she enjoyed walking with the boys, that she felt unusually happy, just as she wanted to be, and the nervousness in her laughter sounded a triumphant note, as if she had carried out an unusually bold and desperate act.

"He's a good man," Salasov answered.

"And what else?" Inna asked impatiently. "What else did you find in him? How do you justify the word 'good'?"

Salasov shrugged his shoulders. He didn't understand clearly why he liked the candidate, it was simply the first time he had seen a young fellow who was already a candidate, and in his opinion a bad fellow couldn't be a candidate, and besides, the candidate had shaken his hand so politely and smiled so sincerely . . . No, the candidate was definitely a good man.

Inna unexpectedly took Salasov's arm.

"How old are you?"

"The same age as Zhenka."

"Call him Evgeni," she stamped capriciously. Inna was excited by something which didn't give her peace.

"Don't listen to her," Zhenka waved his hand, "call me Zhenka. I've gotten used to it. In the final analysis, Onegin was my namesake, and he was an aristocrat, morose and handsome, like Alexander Blok. Now let's go and have a good dinner."

"Do you really write poetry?" Inna asked at dinner. "Did Evgeni tell the truth?"

"That's nonsense. I'm just indulging myself. I worship poets and so I get carried away with poetry."

"Not all poets deserve being worshipped," Inna said didactically. "And what if the projectile had exploded?!" she asked a minute later. "Did you really save the life of that soldier? Or was Evgeni just blabbing? In our civilian age no one is likely to agree to such an action. Each person is capable of talking beautifully of others and thinking highly of himself. And no more."

Inna spoke softly but firmly. In her opinions everything was thought out and decided once and for all, and Salasov sensed something categorical in her words which was not at all in keeping with his own views. She didn't need anyone's opinion and if she asked about something, it was only to convince herself that she was right.

III

In the dormitory Salasov received a mattress, sheets, and a blanket from the linen-keeper and went up to his room.

Lobakov was sitting on his bed in his shorts and darning socks; Khmara was lying dressed in bed and dozing before an open literature textbook. The boys didn't pay any attention to him as he entered. If he enrolled in the university he would have to live with these fellows for several years, to study—the easy life, it seems, had ended once and for all, all he could do was regret it, but he couldn't change it, Salasov gave a deep sigh and opened his textbook...

In the evening they all went together to have supper in the canteen, but it turned out to be closed. Then they bought bread and sausage at the grocer's and ate right on a bench in the public garden.

"In another day we write our composition," Salasov sighed.

"We'll manage, we'll write it if we have to," Lobakov answered firmly. "We'll put on our shoulder straps. We'll go and do what should be done. We came here to take the exam, and not to think whether we'll pass or not. Only Hamlet loved to repeat 'To be or not to be?' With us that shouldn't exist. After all, we didn't serve for three years in the army as defenders of our country for nothing. Hamlet didn't serve in our army. Formerly I was so browbeaten, but now I myself can do some browbeating."

"You're bragging," Khmara said softly and stood up. "What I don't like about you is your bragging. First of all, they'll give you a low grade, because the compositions are written anonymously and your beautiful shoulder straps

won't be visible. And then it won't do to go around beating your breast and screaming: 'We're defenders of our Homeland!' What's so good about that? Every person is a defender."

"I, for one, am afraid I'm not going to pass," Salasov repeated. "If I fail and have to go home, I will simply die of shame."

"I'm also a little bit afraid," Khmara assented softly and set out along a garden path, Lobakov and Salasov behind him.

The wind rocked the trees and it was so lovely in the warm, cozy twilight, that one wished it would last forever. Salasov unexpectedly remembered Inna, her serious, clever face, her long white fingers tapered at the end. And he imagined that he was walking along the path with a girl like that and not thinking about anything. And he began to feel good, and the garden and the twilight and the fellows walking next to him, and everything that was and would be—all of this was unusual, remarkable. The stars twinkled merrily. He recalled his grandmother who invariably shed a few tears when she looked at the stars: 'Winkers, my poor little winkers...'—and explained to him that each star is a soul, and that maybe that star over there, which was winking stronger and more urgently than the others, was the soul of his grandfather Pyotr.

Khmara woke up first. He stretched so deliciously in bed, that his long, bony body began to crack.

Lobakov, half-lying in bed and hunched up over a night-table, began taking notes in his notebook. His handwriting was even, beautiful, distinct, and he wrote slowly, lovingly forming the letters.

"Reveille!" Khmara shouted out.

Lobakov neatly closed his notebook and got dressed.

In the dining room they talked about the exams, and it was the unanimous opinion that the most difficult exam was the first, and that many are screened out after the composition, and only those who are going to be accepted at the university are left; Salasov nodded in agreement, but for

some reason he had a growing conviction that out of all of them he would be the one who wouldn't write the composition. Could it be that he would be the only one?

"Your writing has to be lapidary," Khmara said, and gave Lobakov a superior look, since he didn't know what 'lapidary' meant. "Only lapidary writing will do," Khmara repeated, and didn't explain the word to Lobakov.

"Listen, defenders, we have to pass," Lobakov became thoughtful, sifting through his thoughts, and then continued: "The main thing in our compositions is not to arouse indifference. Am I right? Recently I read something and I must say it was so-so, neither here nor there. I'll write..."

"Do you write?" Salasov was astonished, since he had never even imagined that either of his new friends wrote. "What do you write?"

"I scribble prose, wrote one long story. I'll read it to you after a while."

"Did you send it to the Literary Institute?" Salasov asked, moving closer to Lobakov, and it occurred to him that Lobakov had from the beginning impressed him as an unusual person.

"Yes, I sent it, but it's not so easy for a really outstanding work to get through."

"Don't start fabricating," Khmara said.

"I'm telling you," Lobakov blushed and smiled pitifully. "I'm telling you. I gave it to the guys to read, and to one of the officer's wives. She read it twice, and liked it both times, I'm telling you. I said to her: 'Make corrections, improve it if something isn't right.' She said: 'There's nothing to correct. Everything is wonderful.' Those were her exact words. I'm telling you. You won't start singing like that so soon. They didn't take your poems either."

"You sent something too?" Salasov was amazed. Now no doubts remained that he had the honor of being among interesting, gifted fellows, and he looked at them gratefully.

Back in their room, Salasov and Khmara settled down on their beds to prepare for the essay, while Lobakov went out to the public garden to prepare. Salasov read the textbook until evening. Khmara fell asleep now and then and dropped his book on the floor.

Salasov went to the exam early in the morning. The benches in the university courtyard were shining wetly from the rain of the night before, and the flower beds looked fresh and bright. A small girl in a school uniform with an immense white bow in her hair stood at the door to the university.

"Are you going to the essay exam?" she asked.

"Yes."

"Me too. I'm so nervous, and my mama even got sick from nervousness. Are you nervous?"

"When did you get that idea?" Salasov answered staidly. "It's all the same whether you're nervous or not. If you pass—fine, if not, you're not going to commit suicide over it."

"But I'm such a fool that I can't help being nervous," she looked at Salasov enviously.

... Salasov chose his own topic for the essay. As his epigraph he took the words: "You do not have to be a poet, but you must be a citizen." He sat for a whole hour and looked at the epigraph, and began to despair, while Lobakov and Khmara were dashing off their third page.

"Here, take this outline," Khmara slipped him a sheet with the outline "Image of Tatiana in *Eugene Onegin*"...

Two hours passed. Except for the epigraph, Salasov couldn't think of anything, and he looked miserably from side to side. His head was empty, as if he hadn't prepared yesterday. "No, I won't write anything," he thought. The hands of the clock were counting off the time with catastrophic speed. "Everything is lost. I'm not good for anything. What kind of a citizen am I? A citizen, first of all, isn't a drip, he doesn't lose heart even when he's in the situation which a blockhead in uniform named Salasov finds himself in." Salasov cursed himself. And he began to write that a citizen cannot be a drip... Warming up, he began writing more. He wrote in short sentences, so that he wouldn't make mistakes, and got carried away, his thoughts flowed quickly—if only he would have time to write them down; examples appeared from nowhere, he recalled poems, a Latin saying which his literature teacher in school used to show off with even entered his head: "*Per aspera ad astra*"—"Through the thorns to the stars!" Salasov couldn't understand what

cranny of his brain he got all this from. "That's all," he gave a sigh of relief, and the bell rang. Everyone had already left the classroom, but he kept sitting and didn't leave, and gradually he began to feel that what he wrote was completely unsuitable.

He'd get a low grade, he no longer had any doubt. Everything he wrote passed before his eyes. Both the people whom he met and his service in the army. "Why should I write such stupid stuff," he cursed himself. It was all so naive and stupid, after all, especially the incident on maneuvers when he fell off the rails of a gun, where he had climbed to remove the thick lubricant—it seemed to him that someone had turned on the knife-switch and that he would get an electric shock. No, it was impossible to hand in such an essay, it was simply a disgrace!

"I want to take back my essay," he said to an old gray-haired woman with a pile of essays, leaving the lecture hall in the company of a young associate professor.

"What do you mean take it back?" the old woman was astonished, straightened her glasses, and handed the pile to the associate professor.

"Take my essay back..." Salasov said hoarsely.

The old woman looked at the associate professor.

"Young man, do you understand what you're saying? Give it back? Why, how will we get it back again? It's impossible."

"But I don't want..." Salasov began.

"You're not the only one who doesn't want something. It's amazing how such a thought came into your head! Vikenti Ivanovich, feast your eyes. This is the first time such a ridiculous thing has happened to me. Don't think of it, don't expect it, I won't give it back, it's simply impossible. Go away, young man. I said—go!"

After dinner on the following day Salasov came for his documents, but found out he had received "excellent" for his essay.

"Don't bother me, young man, it's clearly written in the book," the secretary answered angrily.

"But I want to clarify it."

"What are you, a bit touched in the head?" the secretary was angry. "Do you want to make a mockery? Just see how many people are waiting for me! This isn't the place for jokes, you amateur comedian."

Salasov left for the dormitory. Nobody was there. Sheets of paper hung over the beds, both of them with "4" with an exclamation point written in red pencil. Salasov tore a piece of paper from his notebook and traced a "5" on it, sat on his bed, and decided to write a poem for the occasion, but unexpectedly fell asleep.

He woke up late at night.

Khmara was tossing and turning in his bed and muttering something. Salasov listened closely. He was reading poems in his sleep.

The whole following day they prepared for the oral exam in the Russian language; occasionally one of them would go to the grocery store for bread and sausage and, swallowing the food in a hurry, they continued to cram.

"The cribs will help us," Lobakov's voice rung out from time to time, and he showed them long ribbons of paper written all over in his small, even hand.

At the exam Salasov easily analyzed a sentence with an object clause, marked the stress correctly, and answered the question about the words whose spelling must be memorized. And they gave him a "five".

"They were wrong giving you a 'five'," Lobakov concluded when he received a 'three'. "You don't know enough for a 'five', I'm telling you."

"They should have given you a big, fat 'two' for your cribs!" Khmara got angry. "Damn it! Lobakov, you're as dumb as a Siberian log. You and your cribs were almost the death of me! Why did you pass them to me?"

"I wanted to come to your rescue," Lobakov was insulted. "I knew you couldn't answer such a hard question. But they gave you a 'four'. Me a 'three' and you a 'four'. But you don't deserve more than a 'two'. I'm telling you. Do you understand me? You're a fool. It's clear to everybody."

"You're one yourself!" Khmara answered maliciously.

They headed for the subway.

"You have to believe in your comrade," Salasov said to Khmara.

"That's old hat," Khmara answered. "A goose and a pig can't be comrades."

"No people are all bad," Salasov looked at Lobakov with surprise.

"But the elephants are," Khmara burst out laughing.

"Isn't that so, Vanya? There are bad crocodiles in the Nile, but no men are bad. You look at the world, but you don't see things. Your bird brain is incapable of thinking independently."

"But..." Salasov began.

"That's the whole point," Khmara interrupted. "One thing happened to me. I borrowed ten rubles from a fellow. He was happy to give them to me. Well, I thought, here's a great fellow. Later it turned out that he stole the money. A car had knocked someone down. He saw it, ran up, and saw a purse lying alongside. He picked it up and ran, and forgot to help the victim. Here's a parable for you."

"It's all the same," Lobakov uttered weightily, and nudged the fellows, giving the eye to passing girls. "It's all the same. Sometimes a bad thing can help along a good cause, but it's also been known to happen that good works towards evil."

"Go to hell!" Khmara said, and walked away from them.

"You can't argue with him. He doesn't have enough brains," Lobakov sighed. "Tell me, Viktor, how did you get a five? Let me in on your secret, now that it's all behind us. How did you use the crib?"

... Khmara arrived late at the dormitory. His face was flushed, he breathed loudly, and his drunken eyes looked contemptuously at Lobakov.

"I swear," he said, "Vanka Lobakov doesn't believe that you got a 'five' without cribs! Lobakov is stupid. As stupid as a Siberian boot—he doesn't believe anyone. If he says my poems are brilliant, it's just to flatter me."

"Oh, I'm sick and tired of you too, you cretin! All of that is so witless, that it's not even like you," Lobakov said reproachfully, turned towards the wall and began breathing heavily.

Khmara recited his verses until late at night, mentioning

each time that these weren't his best. Salasov listened with bated breath. This was the first time he heard how poets really recited. He had no doubt that Khmara was a real poet.

Salasov couldn't fall asleep for a long time.

"I'll pass German," Khmara said to Salasov when he finished reading his poems and got ready for bed, "don't you worry."

Salasov received a "four" on the exams and Khmara a "five", although he didn't even open a textbook, but spent all his time running to the editorial offices of newspapers and magazines, where he recited his poems. Apparently they didn't like his poems, because he returned silent, angry, rushed to his bed, and immediately fell asleep. But he got an "excellent" in German. Lobakov, who got a "three", considered this a great injustice:

"You really deserved a 'three minus'. You were always lucky."

"You should thank your lucky stars they didn't catch you with your cribs," Khmara said. "Why don't you go and twist cows' tails? Lobakov the supreme milker. Doesn't that sound grand? I'll write you a slogan in verse for your cowshed: 'A cow is not a laughing matter, it should be healthy from cud to udder.' You'll also get a 'three' in history."

Lobakov actually did get a "three" in history. After that he put on his uniform, polished his boots until they shone like the sun, and spent a long time proving to the selection committee that he, a demobilized soldier who had excelled in military training, was treated unfairly; he proved it long and persistently, until they re-examined him. Tearing into the dormitory, he proclaimed joyously:

"Congratulate me! Everyone congratulate me! My name is fifteenth from the top. Congratulate me!"

Salasov and Khmara went off at once to the university. Both of them were included on the list.

Salasov looked at Khmara, now already a student, and it seemed to him that he had become still taller and that his expression had become very intelligent and rarefied.

"So now we're students," Salasov said uncertainly. "You know, when I was in the army I once dreamed that I was standing on the stage and reading Pushkin's poem 'I recollect a wondrous moment...'"

IV

Four days passed. Every day Salasov dropped in at the university, found his name in the lists of those enrolled, and relived once again the new, pleasant feeling.

Once Salasov left for the university early in the morning, returned, and, as usual, lay down on the bed, still intending to write his mother a letter. Nobody was there. He lay with his arms behind his head and stared at the ceiling. Someone knocked. It was Zhenka.

"Hi," he started speaking quickly and loudly, and sat down on a chair. "How's everything? What's new? Why haven't you dropped by? My *pater* has been asking about you."

Evgeni fired all this off and began walking around the room. He looked depressed.

"Well, how was it, did they enroll you?"

"Yes, they did. What about you?"

"Just imagine, they didn't," Zhenka smiled. "Imagine, I was one grade short of the mark for those scoundrels. I myself am terribly surprised by such a historical twist. I'm going to the evening division. That's even better. I'll work. The hell with day school. Get ready to come and visit us. Father said: drag him here, dead or alive. He says that he's guilty of something towards you. If you gave him his way, he would announce that he was guilty towards all the peoples of the world. It's his peculiar inferiority complex."

"You weren't enrolled?" Salasov was amazed, and didn't believe Evgeni. He believed in him so much and never doubted his abilities, and now he had suddenly failed the exams. "You're kidding me. Tell the truth."

"I give the word of Louis the Fourth, king of France. Honestly. Let's go to my place."

Salasov got dressed, still thinking that Evgeni was kidding him and was inviting him because they, the Pataevs, were going to celebrate Evgeni's admission to the university.

The light was burning brightly at the Pataevs'. Inna, dressed in a white crepe blouse with lengthwise flounces on the sleeves, was sitting at the table, and opposite her was Pulkherin, in a black suit, from under which a daggling white nylon shirt could be seen. They were talking about

something. When she saw Salasov, Inna was embarrassed.

"Viktor!" exclaimed Ilya Savelievich, coming in from the corridor. "Viktor! Why, you son of the devil, it seems you haven't been here for a whole month! How can you do that to us? Aren't you ashamed? Huh? Well?" He gave Salasov a strong handshake, not knowing where to seat him. "Sit down over here. Don't be afraid of Inna. She's only so strict for appearance sake. But women are all alike: they're never satisfied. Do you know Kirill Nikolaevich?"

Salasov nodded and sat down near Inna.

"Ilya Savelievich, let's have a snack!" Zhenka shouted. "Why are you making such a fuss? Your Vitek won't run away."

"What do you mean? I'm not doing anything," Ilya Savelievich justified himself. "Your mother isn't here and, as they say, 'don't expect any good from your rib'. Where has she disappeared? She said she would come a little earlier today."

"Don't grieve, Ilya Savelievich, she'll come. Do you think she's having a love affair?" said Evgeni, and everyone laughed except for Salasov. He was silently scrutinizing the candidate.

"Love is blind," said Ilya Savelievich, not to be outdone.

"Yes, our life is like the Dnieper River—it roars and groans," Evgeni laughed.

"What am I compared to him," Salasov thought, looking at the candidate. "A candidate! And what a good looking fellow! Tall, taller than me, a thin moustache, and very clever eyes. Damn it, if only I had such eyes."

"Where were you born?" candidate unexpectedly asked Salasov.

"In Siberia."

"The backwoods—that's curious," he was pleasantly surprised. "We keep intending to go down the Enisey in canoes some summer. Is it true what they say, that there are forests all round? And many bears? The forest is wonderful. Why, it's great, Inna! What do you think?"

The candidate asked questions, but he didn't require an answer. He spoke quietly, softly, with a well modulated voice, and his questions didn't sound like questions, but like assertions.

"Just see how he's examining you!" Inna said to Salasov. "Isn't it true, Viktor? Doesn't he ask very clever, I would say ultra-clever, questions? Listen, candidate, let's talk without your imagining that you're some kind of sperm-whale, king of the oceans."

"Inna, you're talking nonsense again," Evgeni smiled. "Stop it. Whenever there's a quarrel my mouth smells of kerosene."

"Leave me alone," Inna brushed him off and glanced at Salasov.

Why did Inna let herself go like that and begin mocking the candidate? The candidate stared silently at Inna; his eyes expressed neither blame nor interest; there was mute reproach in his large, shining eyes, and Salasov began to feel sorry for him.

"You're all riled up, now that's enough," Ilya Savelievich grumbled, addressing Viktor for some reason. "Isn't that right, sonnie? That's not a quarrel, but gobbledygook. Enough."

"Ilya Savelievich, let's get fueled up some more," Evgeni began speaking. "Oh, let's get soused! How about it, Ilya Savelievich?"

"Do you have any dry wine?" the candidate asked. "My throat is a little sore, somehow."

"Oh, that's wonderful!" Ilya Savelievich exclaimed. "Kirill Nikolaevich, excuse me, sinner that I am! I'm an unlearned man, I finished five grades, and the sixth, as they say, was the corridor, but on this score I will say modestly: vodka sweeps illness from the organism like a broom! Its breath drives out the microbe. So let's drink our fill 'fore our life becomes nil."

"Those words are like poetry on your lips, Ilya Savelievich," Evgeni assented, and handily downed a shot.

The candidate sipped a little bit and put down his glass.

As if to reproach the candidate, Inna drank the whole shot and silently ate a slice of sausage. Salasov glanced at Inna and thought: "Now, if she looks at me, then..." And Inna unexpectedly looked at him and wagged her finger.

"Tell us, candidate of chemical sciences..." Inna asked in a strained voice, "now tell us, candidate of chemical

sciences, how did life begin? We in particular and life in general?"

"I've told you. As the result of lengthy and complex biosynthesis," he answered seriously, put his fork aside, and, apparently wishing to continue the conversation, loosened his tie.

"You don't say!" Inna drawled. "How interesting, it's the first time I've heard that, it seems. As the result of biosynthesis? Not just anyhow, but as the result of the most complex biosynthesis. Well now! So you say as the result of biosynthesis? How brilliant! Now everything makes sense. What book did you read that in?"

The candidate stood up, coughed softly and, seeing that no one was paying any attention to him, said:

"It's time for me to go, excuse me. Thank you for supper."

"I'm going too," Salasov jumped up.

When he was already on the street, he thought: "Why in the world did I come?" It turned out it was for no particular reason. He asked Evgeni who, together with Inna, was seeing him and the candidate off:

"What were we drinking for? What for?"

"Just so. What were we drinking for, Vitek? We were just drinking, not for anything in particular. Let's go, I'll take you to the subway."

"No, I'll go with him," Inna said, and took Salasov's arm. "You accompany Pulkherin, Evgeni."

"But Inna," the candidate exclaimed softly. "I wanted to tell you..."

"Some other time, Pulkherin, you can tell me some other time," Inna answered. "Let's go, Viktor, let's go."

She began pulling Salasov by the hand. Salasov didn't know what to say. They walked silently for a long time. The street was dark, although the streetlamps were lit; a wind was blowing, and low clouds were scampering above the city.

"It's autumn already," Inna said.

Salasov felt uncomfortable. He was trying feverishly to say something witty and interesting, but nothing came to his mind. Sweat broke out on his forehead and his knees began trembling unpleasantly, and he said, as if plunging into a maelstrom:

"After the autumn it'll be winter."

"How I love winter!" Inna brightened. "Ice skates and freezing weather are my passion. What I really love is winter. It's even pleasant to stay at home in the winter. It's thirty below zero outside, but it's warm and cozy in the apartment. When you come in from the cold your fingers burn so. Yes, I do love the winter!"

"Yes." Salasov cautiously looked at Inna from time to time and when their glances met, he became embarrassed, and was a little frightened because she, Inna, was walking next to him, quietly clicking her heels on the sidewalk, straightening her blouse and her hair. And he was seeing all this, walking alongside her, feeling so unusual and amazing.

They turned into a side street and walked past some coldly rustling trees.

"Vitya, have they already accepted you?" she asked softly. "Here's your university. Shall we sit for a while on a bench? Somebody else is sitting over there."

"Yes, I'm enrolled," Salasov answered.

"Why didn't you come to see us right away? You don't have any relatives in Moscow, do you?"

"No. It's bad not to have any relatives. But I'm already used to it, honestly. I served in the army for three years, so judge for yourself. When I left my mother was in tears, of course. Where will you go, she said. But I wanted to leave, to go away somewhere. It seems that everyone has the desire sometimes to give up everything and go away."

"I would be lost without my mama and papa," Inna laughed. "Totally lost. They've spoiled me so much, the fools. It's simply terrible."

Inna sat at the edge of the bench and looked him in the face.

"How did you get settled? I've always envied those who live in the dormitory. It means you're completely on your own. That's life in earnest. I'm in my fourth year, but I'm like a little schoolgirl. A punctual, conscientious schoolgirl. But you live alone. You have ideas, you have your own life, you're a very serious person, and it's not surprising that you write poetry. Not at all surprising. Just look at Pulkherin. Just look! He doesn't know anything but chemistry

books. Among books he's like a fish in water, but, after all, life isn't only books. It's something more. And he's not capable of anything more. Is it possible that he seriously thinks that life is biosynthesis? You can't say anything more stupid. It can lead to the conclusion that man will fulfill a determined function—and will turn everything—that is, man and woman—into puppets, and a puppet is almost an automaton, it doesn't have feelings or ideas, it lacks independence. A marionette wouldn't rush to rescue someone . . . Goodbye."

"No, no," Salasov didn't agree, "you speak so well. But you're upset. Why? You were very right to say that a man is inseparable from his feelings and thoughts. Of course an albumen is one thing and a man another. And that is already enough."

"So long," said Inna, and ran for the trolleybus.

Salasov sat for a long time near the dormitory and thought about Inna. He recalled books which wrote about meetings and love, but it seemed that he had never read in any book about a girl who was as pretty as Inna, who could speak so well, and his thoughts kept returning to her, and he imagined her riding in the trolleybus, how stern her thoughtful face was and how she, possibly, was thinking of him.

The door to the dormitory was open, and the old porter was snoring on the leatherette sofa. Salasov ran up to the third floor in a single bound.

A light was burning in the room. Khmara was sleeping in new pants and a shirt which he had apparently bought that day, while Lobakov's clothes lay neatly folded on a chair, his highly polished boots were standing next to the night-table, and one could see that he was a soldier all over, even in the way he slept.

Salasov quickly got undressed, turned off the light, and crawled under the blanket; he still couldn't wait to think about the evening. He recalled again all of Inna's words, how she slowly walked through the streets, how softly and unhurriedly she spoke, and in everything: her words, such simple words, as it turned out, the way she bent her head

as if waiting for something, even the way she walked in her shoes, the very clicking of her heels—he saw and heard only one thing: how remarkable she was!

He woke up late. Khmara wasn't around. Lobakov was lying on his bed and writing something in a book. Outside, in the bright sunlight, the sparrows were chirping for all they were worth.

"Life goes on," Salasov said, and jumped out of bed.

"Look, Salasov, what if we go today to throw boxes around, in the name of prolonging life?" asked Lobakov, without raising his eyes from the book. "It's only an hour's work, and we'll earn fifty five rubles a piece. Is it worth the effort?"

"What boxes?" Salasov said, surprised, hanging a towel around his neck and going to get washed.

"In the canteen. Beer and milk was delivered, and they offered me the chance to make a little money. They'll pay us. 'Share and share alike.' Good people made the offer, they'll always have work for us. O.K.?"

"The hell with them!" Salasov brushed him off. "You think I'm going to load boxes! And then unload . . . The hell with them. I have other things on my mind now."

"Listen, stupid, you don't get my meaning," Lobakov burst out laughing and stood up from the bed. "What, do you have a lot of it?"

"Of what?"

"Why, of money!" Lobakov exclaimed. "You must be rolling in dough. Or do you have rich parents? Who is your father—chairman of a collective farm?"

"I don't have a father."

For Salasov yesterday's impressions were still fresh, and to talk of money seemed petty, unpleasant, an affront to his glowing feelings. He went to wash, and when he returned to the room, Lobakov wasn't there.

"What a character!" Salasov burst out laughing. "Such characters exist in the wide world who think only about their precious stomach!" He again began to smile, recalling yesterday evening. He didn't feel like eating breakfast or thinking about anything except Inna—everything seemed petty, unworthy of attention,

He put on his uniform, thinking that it wouldn't be bad to exchange it for the same kind of impeccable suit which he saw the candidate wearing. Only five rubles turned up in the pocket of his soldier's shirt.

"Pretty thin pickings," he said to himself. "I'll have to ask my brother for some money."

Right then, while his luck was holding, he wrote his brother a letter. He described his happy news and at the end added that he had no money at all, the money he had accumulated in the army had run out. His brother lived in Krasnoyarsk and worked as a driver. Salasov mailed the letter and, thinking all the time of Inna, had a bite at the dining room. He then hurried off to the university.

A notice hung on the information board: "All freshmen should appear at the university by 10 o'clock on September 1." They said at the dean's office that in September the freshmen were to be sent to a collective farm to pick potatoes.

On September 1, they lined up on the campus, then packed into a bus and started out. Lobakov took a seat at Salasov's side.

"Are we going for long?" Salasov asked.

"For a month. To work for a month without pay isn't exactly appealing. Our gloomy pal wriggled out of it—he's going to write poems and run around to editorial offices. There's no profit to be made at that collective farm, I have no interest at all in going. I'm telling you."

"Oh, drop it!" Salasov brushed him off. "Does there have to be a profit?"

They drove out of the city, the bus turned onto a country road and jolted through the forest, which was already touched here and there with yellow.

"It's beautiful," Salasov thought, looked at the fields, forests, the pensive, low, cloud-covered sky. It felt good to ride and rock in the bus, and look around; he saw something close and kindred in everything, and again he remembered Inna and began to feel so good. This was his mood when he got off the bus.

A small girl with large, serious eyes approached Salasov and asked:

"Hello. Don't you remember me? I recognized you in the bus right away."

Salasov shrugged his shoulders. The girl was wearing yellow stretch pants and a pink wool cardigan.

"You can kill me on the spot, but I can't remember," he answered, smiling.

"When we wrote the essay, remember? We were the first to arrive. I came early, and you were already there, in the garden. You weren't afraid of anything, remember?"

"A-ah!" Salasov exclaimed. "A-ah! I remember! Your mama was also very nervous then?"

"You remember! I knew it. I had a dream about it."

She went away uncertainly. Salasov didn't even ask her name.

"Hey!" he shouted. She stopped. "What's your name?"

"What for? Liudmila."

"That's Liuda in Russian," he smiled. "My name is Viktor."

"Glad to meet you," she looked down and grew pale, and, lowering her head so that he wouldn't see, softly said once more: "Glad to meet you."

From then on Salasov often saw this girl near him. She would pick potatoes behind him after he had dug them out, or would unexpectedly be sitting not far from him at the club, where a whole group of them had gone to the movies, or they would be sitting at the same table in the dining room; she sat with her eyes lowered, she never looked at him, but he felt that she saw him nevertheless, and he found it pleasant that this girl, small, and with such large, dreamy, and serious eyes, was sitting silent next to him. Not once did he start a conversation with her or ask her anything.

Money from his brother was waiting for him in the dormitory, with a postscript that he, Viktor, was already grown up and should support himself. He chewed out his younger brother for writing letters only when there was a dire need.

In spite of the postscript, Salasov was pleased.

He bought himself trousers and a bright cowboy shirt

and headed for the Pataevs. Wet leaves were lying on the road and sidewalks, the trees were sighing plaintively, and low clouds were scurrying across the sky. As he walked he tried to think up a reason for his visit, but he couldn't think up anything. He rang. Nobody opened the door. He rang again and, when nobody opened the door after the second and third ring, he gave a sigh of relief and went back to the dormitory.

So a month passed. He received fifty rubles from his mother and bought a jacket, raincoat, and shoes.

Salasov took careful notes at lectures, but if you asked him what he wrote down, it is unlikely he could have answered: he thought about his mother, about her letter, where she said that if he needed money he should write: "The main thing is to study," she wrote. Salasov sat for a long time answering her letters and remembered his village, and he was sorry for his whole large family, brothers and sisters, who had left their mother and scattered all over Russia. She, the mother of ten sons and daughters, was living alone. At first her letter absorbed all his thoughts. He thought of his mother at lectures and in the dormitory . . .

Khmara began pleading with Salasov to keep him company and help him choose a corduroy suit.

. . . There was a crowd of customers at the fair, in spite of the cold. Lines were standing near the pavilions; people were dashing about from counter to counter.

"Look, what a pretty saleswoman," Khmara said from time to time, and nodded towards a girl behind a counter.

Some fellows stopped not far off and, turning towards the neighboring pavilion, talked about a girl standing at the counter. Salasov turned towards her automatically.

"Inna!" he shouted, and dashed towards her.

He wasn't expecting to see Inna, in his soul he had lost all hope, and here she was, standing ten steps away. She was wearing a light yellow coat and suede shoes with very high stiletto heels.

"Viktor?" she asked in surprise and stopped. "What are you doing here? Hello."

"Hello," Salasov nodded constrained. "I'm waiting for someone. He's buying suit,"

"Is he old?"

"No, he's young."

"Why haven't you dropped in to see us?" she asked and came closer to him and, in her customary way, looked right into his eyes.

"How are you?" Salasov asked and felt infinitely guilty towards her and Ilya Savelievich and Evgeni.

"Same as ever," she answered. "Only now Evgeni is a representative of the working class, he's working as a turner. It seems he's not capable of more. And papa remembers you quite often. I'm studying. Everything flows but nothing changes. They say that life seeps like a roof during pouring rain. I've thought of you often."

Salasov suddenly told her how he had gone to see them several times, but never caught them at home, and how he waited for her by their house for a long time, and how later he began feeling awkward and ashamed that he hadn't dropped by for so long, that in general he didn't know now whether it was worth dropping by.

"Look, what Salasov is doing!" Khmara exclaimed, coming out of the pavilion with a package. "You made a pick-up so fast? That's talent! One senses good training!"

"Let me introduce you," Salasov said, "this is Inna."

"Why, how, and where?" Khmara was amazed, and looked inquisitively at Inna. "'I recollect a wondrous moment!...'" 'And so her name was...'" 'And through a magic crystal ball I dimly saw her...'"

"Are you all poets?" Inna asked Salasov.

"We have piles of talent," Khmara answered. "Only diamonds wherever you look! And we all arouse 'kind sentiments' in the people. Haven't you heard of the well-known poet Anatoli Khmarovski?"

"Khmara," Salasov corrected him.

"Anatoli Khmarovski," Khmara repeated.

"No."

"But it's impossible that you haven't heard of him. He's now all the rage. But tell me," Khmara asked, not yet understanding anything, "can it be that you've just met?"

"Don't worry, we've known each other for a long time," Salasov put his mind at rest. "Let's go to the subway."

On the way to the subway Khmara tried with all his might to be witty, and strewed Inna with compliments—Inna didn't react at all. They stopped near the subway station. Khmara remembered that there was a party that day at the university, and asked:

"Salasov, I hope you haven't forgotten to invite Inna to our party?... Then allow me, princess, to correct the blunder of this ignoramus."

Salasov blushed, but Inna said "No" at once.

"Go, Khmara," he laughed. "Go to the party. Don't forget to put on your jacket."

Khmara said goodbye and left. Inna silently walked away from the subway, towards Luzhniki. Salasov walked slightly behind her.

"Inna, would you like to go to the movies?"

"No, I don't want to. That friend of yours is a strange fellow... Khmarovski, or what's his name? Men like him are usually despots. Deep in their soul they despise women."

"Why, he's simply Khmara. He just gave himself the name Khmarovski. It has a more ringing sound."

"He looks at us as though he's saying 'But I know why you meet.' He's vulgar."

"He's a bit of a monster, but he's kind. Honestly. It's just that he read somewhere that all poets loved to run after women."

"I waited for you, Viktor," Inna said unexpectedly, and looked around at him. "It seemed to me that you were lacking something that every fellow has. You won't be insulted by my frankness?"

"What is it?"

"The smug self-assurance that every girl would go down on her knees before you. You're not like that. I kept thinking of you. Shall we sit down?"

They chose a bench and took a seat. The wind was whistling in the branches of the lindens. Sometimes small snow pellets would pour down, give a staccato tap against the frozen branches of the bare lindens, and then a cold breath, already wintry, would roll over them, sitting there, like a wave, and Inna would look around, as if wondering why there was no snow,

"Inna, what year are you in?"

"My fourth. I'll work somewhere in a scientific research institute. But why do you ask? Is it really interesting? Polymers are a bore. Now, what are you going to be? That's interesting. You'll probably be a journalist, won't you? How wonderful it is—to write poems and articles, and the next day see others reading them, people drinking in your thoughts and feelings, to travel to other countries, and possibly to fly some day into the cosmos as a reporter. 'Hello, this is Viktor Salasov speaking, the boundless expanses of the universe are before us...' And so on. I also used to write... I have no desire to work as a chemist."

Inna spoke, carried away, and believed in what she was saying. Her face became flushed. She looked at her shoes and seemed to reproach Salasov for something, and her voice was reproachful. Salasov wanted to make everything which she was talking about a reality.

"Would you fly with me into the cosmos, for example?" he asked, and was astonished at his muffled voice.

"Definitely! Of course! Viktor, you're so good. I don't know why everything seems to come so hard for us. As if someone didn't want us to meet. If I simply made a date with some other fellow, he would hang around my house for days, but you... Tell me, did you want to see me?" she asked and burst out crying. "Tell me, but only the truth?"

"Inna," Salasov uttered softly. He thought that someone must have hurt her, and decided that only one person could be the offender—the candidate. Strange as it may seem, Salasov was constantly haunted by the thought that Inna would never want to leave the candidate for his sake, and he never doubted that the candidate was her fiancé. "Inna, if only you knew how much I've thought about you!... I couldn't listen to lectures, your image was before me all the time."

"It's not true," Inna stood up. "It's not true. If you were thinking of me you would have tried to meet me. And you didn't try... You forgot about me. Admit it, you forgot!"

"I didn't forget."

"No, you forgot."

As before, waves of mist floated over the Moskva River.

On the bus Inna looked at Salasov and smiled.

"What was it?" he asked, when they got off the bus.

"Your nose is so blue! Completely blue. And you're a Siberian! Let's go to my house, I'll warm you up."

... It was dark in the corridor. Inna whispered something in Salasov's ear and he felt her breath near him; because of the darkness, her quiet, conspiratorial voice, the fact that she was standing close to him, and himself, Salasov suddenly felt something that he had never felt before, and he embraced Inna, standing so close, light and yielding, also expecting something, and he kissed her, kissed her here, right in the dark corridor, in the corridor filled with strange sounds and smells. "Inna, Inna," he said softly, trying to kiss her again.

"Quiet, they're watching us," she whispered in his ear and opened the door. "Papa, I found him!" she proclaimed merrily, as though nothing had just happened.

Salasov was embarrassed when he saw everyone in the room—Ilya Savelievich, the candidate and Evgeni. They were watching television.

"The television is going into retirement," Inna said, and turned it off.

"Brother Horace, you haven't been to our Penates for a long time," Evgeni laughed. "You've become very grand. What should a man be to his fellow man? You don't know? A friend, a comrade, and a true brother."

The candidate sat in the armchair. He was wondering why Salasov and Inna had arrived together. As always, his face was calm and impassive. Nevertheless, it was evident by the way he kept crossing his legs and nervously looking in his pockets for his handkerchief that he was upset. Salasov stretched out his hand. The candidate rose slightly and shook it quickly.

"Very glad to see you," he said in a suddenly shrunken voice. "Very glad."

Inna looked at the candidate who was openly shrugging his shoulders.

"I don't understand you," Inna said to the candidate. "Tell us instead, Pulkherin, how life on earth began?"

Pulkherin gave a cough, put on a serious face, already opened his mouth, but Inna interrupted him.

"As the result of complex biosynthesis," she said, and began laughing.

"You keep asking me the same thing. What for? Even the form of a detailed answer would be very complex. I can give a thorough analysis—only if you're interested, of course. . ."

"And now tell us," Inna interrupted him, "how many kilometers is it from the sun to Jupiter, for example? You're studying the chemical structure of heavenly bodies, aren't you? Tell us."

"Seven hundred and seventy eight million three hundred thousand kilometers," said the candidate and shrugged his shoulders. "Why do you want to know? To test my memory?"

"Now name. . ."

"I will not. You're not being serious," the candidate got angry. "It sounds stupid. You're not saying the right thing. Ilya Savelievich, don't you sense a destructive passion, a lack of balance here?"

"We old folks have our own concerns," Ilya Savelievich answered, and suddenly jumped up, saying in a whisper: "Oh! Do you smell something? They're burning! The meat croquettes! Lord, the devil take me!" He rushed out of the room, repeating: "They're burning, burning!" His voice was so filled with despair, that it seemed that, at the very least, the entire house was burning.

Evgeni began telling Salasov about his work in an undertone, that the pay was quite good, that he wasn't living badly, and that attending the institute's evening courses wasn't too burdensome.

"Yes, of course," Salasov answered, glancing stealthily at Inna.

"What's new in the world of poetry?" the candidate asked in a friendly voice, with barely perceptible condescending humor.

Salasov didn't hear him, and the candidate had to repeat the question.

"Nothing," Salasov answered. "There's nothing new."

"How many poems have you written lately?"

"Right now I'm not writing poetry. It's taking form in my mind. Is it really possible to write several long narra-

tive poems in such a short period? Pushkin couldn't have done it."

"But if a poet is talented, why not?" the candidate shrugged his shoulders. "Now Vergil, for example, could have done it. What do you think?"

"I haven't read his works," Salasov was at a loss.

"But I trust you have no doubts about Horace and Torquato Tasso? Or, say, about Appolinaire? Or about Pindar? You probably don't like Igor Severyanin? But what about contemporary poets, Leonid Martynov, for example?"

Salasov fell silent and turned to Evgeni for help. He hadn't read these poets. The candidate was obviously making a laughing stock of him. Salasov fell into his snare like a stupid hazel-grouse. And the candidate was looking at him affectionately, as if saying: "Just look at your idol, Inna..." Maria Afanasievna and Ilya Savelievich entered. Maria Afanasievna smiled at Pulkherin and scolded him for coming so seldom to visit them.

"I was on a business trip, Maria Afanasievna. And now I'm spinning like a top." The candidate rose. "I'm preparing material. My academician is advising me, even insisting that I do it. I told you about him."

"That's right," Maria Afanasievna agreed. "There was a delivery of English women's shoes to our store. Suede, with a patent leather toe. Inna, I'm saying this for you. You work so much, Kirill Nikolaevich, and you didn't go south this summer. Did you hear, Inna. Kirill Nikolaevich doesn't take care of himself. What do you say to that?"

"Let him take care of himself," Inna answered. "Let him buy warm slippers for the winter!"

The candidate bending towards Maria Afanasievna, was saying something. Salasov was sitting on pins and needles, still smarting from his humiliation.

They drank and ate hors d'oeuvres. Maria Afanasievna soon went to the kitchen.

"Tell me," the candidate addressed Salasov, making him tremble, "tell me, Viktor, do you believe in noble motives?"

"I believe like everybody else," Evgeni answered for him. "I, for example, am a very noble man. But peace of mind is the most important. Noble motives are the nail on which the world hangs scoundrels."

"Why should I doubt and not believe in it, when I'm surrounded by noble people?" Salasov answered, but he thought: "Why is he asking me that—isn't it a new dirty trick?" "I always believed in noble motives," he said. "How could I help it? Do you doubt that it exists?"

"I doubt many things," the candidate answered. "I think, therefore I am", said a certain French philosopher and mathematician. But thinking and doubting are one and the same."

"He's a philosopher, it's his job to doubt," Evgeni laughed. "Oh, these scholars! They don't understand a blasted thing about life. That's the truth!"

V

The first thing to come into Salasov's head when he woke up in the dormitory in the morning was again: "He doubts." When Khmara and Lobakov woke up, Salasov asked Khmara:

"Do you believe in noble motives?"

"Don't worry," Khmara answered sleepily. "Don't worry. I didn't like your Inna very much. But in any case, judge an aphorism of my making: 'Noble motives are a screen for speculators.' Understand? If somebody makes a martyr of himself for his noble motives, don't believe him. But don't be afraid, I didn't like Inna. And in general, dialectics are better. You know, it's something which will get you out of crammy situation. Your Inna's eyes when she looked at you... I'm no fool. I understand people."

"Well, what else do you have to say?" Salasov asked. He jumped up lightly from his bed and began his physical exercises. "What else do you have to say, Khmara?"

"Here's what: it is rare for a skirt to bring man happiness. Do not drink up your fill of this brew poisonous. It'll make you blue."

"Khmara, I'm telling you, you're wrong to throw all that stuff at him," Lobakov uttered weightily, writing down some fresh notes on a pad. A pile of books and new notebooks labelled in a very beautiful handwriting with the year, group, and name of the owner were lying neatly on

Lobakov's night-table. A gray jacket with a pin stripe was hanging on the back of a chair, a light blue zippered shirt lying on top of it. Shoes with thick porous rubber soles stood just as neatly alongside. Lobakov liked precise, durable opinions, he tried to establish cleanliness and order in everything. During a lecture, he even said tactfully to a professor: "Please define your thought more precisely." Lobakov was not very fond of Khmara because of his messiness, and especially because he had to straighten out the room for him as well as for himself. "Pay me a ruble", he said angrily to Khmara. "I'm not going to work for nothing. Slavery is a thing of the past. This isn't ancient Rome. I'm a white man and I love justice."

Khmara guffawed and slapped him resoundingly on the back.

"Incidentally, I have an announcement to make, gentlemen", Lobakov said carelessly, "I've gotten fixed up with a job. Confidentially speaking, it's even a pretty good one. They'll give me sixty rubles for the opportunity to come to a printing office and read books. Not so bad! It's even pretty good, I would say. Such jobs didn't exist in ancient Rome, if you'll allow me to say so."

"The scientific term for such work is 'watchman'," Khmara burst out laughing. "Punctum saluens. The king of Guadeloupe in the role of a watchman. What a subject!"

"You've mastered Latin well", Salasov complained. "But I know only three words—I just can't get it, it doesn't sink in".

"Latin is the language of the gods, although we need it like a dead man needs a poultice or a fish a Japanese umbrella! But it sounds so fine! The devil take it by the legs and fling it on the ground! *Exegi monumentum!...*" That's sonorous and beautiful!" Khmara began to recite his poems. "Sound good?"

"Splendid!" Salasov was carried away.

"The last line of every stanza limps like a cow whose leg was broken by a neighbor for eating up the young cabbage in his kitchen garden", Lobakov answered.

"Oh, you country bumpkin!" Khmara, who expected praise and had already made up his mind to read further, was insulted. "A cow. A broken leg. You're a cow yourself!"

What comparisons you chose. Such a comparison for such a poem. . . I can see you're a colossal fool".

"It takes one to know one", Lobakov was not to be left behind. "As if you weren't from the country yourself. In the final analysis all Russian people came from the country. However, I don't want to talk to you. You're a malicious critic and don't want to say anything kind. Even in ancient Rome, by the way, they thrashed people like you without mercy."

"All my conscious life all I dreamed about was talking with a blockhead like you," Khmara said. "You'll be doing me a great favor. My spittle contains more thoughts than all your gray matter, habitually called a brain by stupid people. You have only one convolution, and even that's drawn with a dotted line."

"Fellows! . . ." Salasov shouted.

"By the way, today, we get our dough," Khmara sang out in a conciliatory tone. "For the sake of greater clarity let's keep our unclear thoughts to ourselves."

"All right," Lobakov waved his hand, "go jump in the lake." "There's one more vacancy for a watchman," he addressed Salasov. "Where? It's a secret. Will you take it? I can nail it for you. And there's another job:

If you want to be a king
Go and work for Mos-Loading."

"I don't know," Salasov answered listlessly. After Khmara's mockery, he considered it degrading to work as a watchman.

"Do you have another summit meeting today?" Lobakov asked.

"Yes, in the evening."

"Beware you don't end up without your pants. This is all frivolity—remember, you have to live. You can yell and shout, but there's no way out. I want to come to your rescue, but all you do is hand around with this dame."

"She's not a dame!" Salasov burst out. "Don't you dare talk about her like that!"

"I'm not talking about her, I'm generalizing," Lobakov said kindly. "What is it to me? Nothing. I'm telling you. I have definite experience on this score. So you're not going to work?"

"I don't know."

"You don't have any experience on that score, Lobakov—I'm revising your statement for accuracy," Khmara said. "Love is higher than any experience—you could have had".

"That's my business," Lobakov snapped.

At seminars the instructors often asked Salasov questions. He stood up, frowned, pretended that he was trying to remember something, and . . . sat down.

Lobakov tried to prompt him, but, convinced that Salasov didn't know anything, he gave it up. "Don't interfere," the instructor said to Lobakov. "I'm not interfering," Lobakov answered. "Then why are you prompting him?" "We live together. He's my friend." "You mean well, Lobakov, but you're doing him more harm than good." "But how would you act in my place? Would you refuse to help a friend?"

When the seminar had ended Salasov received his stipend and headed for the dormitory. Lobakov went with him. He painted a glowing picture for Salasov of the advantages of working at the printing office, which, aside from the purely material advantages, also made a student more disciplined. "First of all, nobody knows that you're working, for that matter, nobody knows that you're an ordinary, rank and file Soviet watchman. Second, when you're there at night in the bright 'daytime', lighting, you don't feel at all like sleeping, and you nibble the granite of knowledge. Third, you feel much more confident with any girl when you have money than when you don't. Fourth, work refreshes your thoughts and feelings." Then for greater emotional effect, Lobakov blamed those students who begged their parents for their last rubles.

Fifteen rubles from his mother was waiting for Salasov in the dormitory. Lobakov looked gloomily at his friend and gave an impressive cough. Right after he had agreed absolutely with Lobakov that it was impossible to beg one's parents for money—especially a solitary mother—he received the transfer.

"But it's not my fault," Salasov said pitifully. "Word of honor, it's not my fault. What could she have been thinking of when she sent it? Are you very busy? Will you come with me to the post office?"

When he received the money, Salasov decided at once to send it back. "Money not needed," he wrote his mother. He wrote it and made a blot on the blank. He took another blank, but his hands began trembling and another blot appeared.

"Let me." Lobakov took the pen from him and, in his calligraphic handwriting, wrote the address and the "Money not needed."

The money was sent off, and Salasov calmed down.

"Once the money came, you might as well have kept it," Lobakov said. "I'm telling you. Do you know how much you could hurt her? Somebody does you a good turn, but you make nothing of it. Objectively, you want to do something good, but subjectively it has the opposite effect. All around everything is topsy-turvy. Khmara doesn't like to think about that. He doesn't consider that for some people things are bad, while for others they're good. His poems are worthless! At first he stunned me with them, but now I see they're not the thing. Not the thing. He recites well. He knows how to present them, but if you read them a little by yourself you'll see—there's nothing to them. He likes ringing sounds and glitter. But all that glitters is not gold."

Lobakov began complaining that he had to straighten out the room for Khmara, and on top of that Khmara was copying his homework on Old Slavonic. Salasov nodded, but wasn't listening to Lobakov. In the dormitory, they decided to study until evening, but somebody knocked.

A girl entered. "Hello," she said softly.

"Lyudka!" Lobakov shouted for joy. "Hi! Sit down on the chair. No, not on this one. On mine. How's life treating you? Let me introduce you, Viktor, this is Lyuda,"

"We know each other," the girl said and glanced at Salasov. She was wearing high heels, a pleated skirt, and a thick wool cardigan. "I just came by for a minute," Lyuda looked lost. "Just for one minute, no more."

She glanced at Salasov. Her glance was guilty, pleading somehow, as if she were begging him ahead of time to forgive her for something.

"Did you come here right after the seminars?" Lobakov asked. "What can we offer you?"

"I dropped by at home. I've come to see you just for a moment. I dropped in at my girl friend's, she's come down with the flu. I was just at my girl friend's; she has temperature."

Lobakov asked her questions. She answered, but looked at the floor, as if she didn't want to show how long her eyelashes were.

"How's your mama?" Salasov asked. "I haven't seen you for a long time. Have you been sick?"

Lyuda began blinking very quickly and her lips began trembling; she stood up, opened the door, and said, practically crying:

"I don't sit far from you at lectures. Mama isn't sick, thanks."

She went out.

"What's going on?" Lobakov was perplexed. "What's happening?"

"How should I know? Why are you asking me?"

"Don't get it into your head to hurt her." Lobakov looked at Salasov closely. "Don't get it in your head. Make no mistake. She's no flighty, fickle-hearted flirt. She'll make a good honest wife for any man. Such girls are rare nowadays. There used to be women like that, but they don't exist now, they're highly prized. Look out! When it comes to women, I'm a sceptic, but not when it comes to Lyuda. She's a rare person."

Salasov opened his textbook and pretended he wasn't listening to Lobakov.

"Ah ... here are Horace's poems," he whispered, "and here ... are Virgil's...."

"There are some fools, I'll say to you, whom I don't understand," Lobakov continued. "The devil knows from what point of view they look at a girl. You should look at her from the point of view of what kind of wife she'll make for you, because that's for your whole life."

Inna was waiting for him at the entrance to Gorky Park. When she saw Salasov she ran to meet him. They walked along a park path, stepping on the crackling, frozen leaves. The paths were deserted. Only occasionally did they

meet passers-by. The ferris-wheel was working, but there was nobody near it. They walked farther, past the pond, in which frozen ducks and large yellow leaves were floating. Inna was silent. Salasov tried to speak, but the only thing that whirled through his head was: "Here she is, next to me!..." They sat down on a bench, under a spreading tree.

"Do you love me?" Inna asked softly.

"Yes."

Inna turned away and began crying.

"Lord, I thought of you all night, and I dreamed of you. I can't go on like this. I'll go out of my mind..."

"Inna, Inna," Salasov comforted her, "what's the matter, Innochka? I think of you all the time, too."

Inna stood up and walked along the path, looking under her feet. Salasov followed her. He wanted to embrace her, to press her to himself; now and then he touched her elbow, he kept wanting to say something.

A cold wind blew straight in their faces. Unexpectedly hard snow granules began bouncing on the asphalt, the wind immediately abated, and it became warm. The wind disappeared so unexpectedly that the trees were still rocking and beating their bare branches against one another. It became totally silent for a time, the creaking of the rocking branches barely audible... And now Salasov saw snow. Large flakes were slowly drifting towards the earth...

Then the flakes flashed by and a light snow, the first of the year, began to fall. In a minute the asphalt grew white and could only be guessed at by its living blackness through the thin fluff of snow.

"Snow!" Inna exclaimed. "Viktor, tell me, do you love me very much?"

"Yes."

"Then let the first snow be our witness!"

VI

Salasov returned to the dormitory late, went to bed, and retraced that day's meeting with Inna in his mind; he relived it once more, and couldn't fall asleep until morning.

He suddenly imagined Inna as his wife clearly and distinctly. In the morning he didn't go to the university. Khmara tried for a long time to rouse him, but Salasov didn't wake up.

From that day on he began meeting Inna every day. He started to write poems again and read them to Inna, dedicating the best ones to her. Inna was pleased and said that she had never read anything like them, and advised him to seek out connections on journals.

"Not for anything!" Salasov exclaimed. "Get published just because I have connections—not for anything! That's blasphemy! No, no, no."

"But Vitya," she repeated patiently. "You're very talented. You have to make sure they come to know about you."

"How do you know?" Salasov was surprised and began to be jealous of some other man who, it seemed to him, also wrote poetry, and from whom Inna found all of this out.

...The semester ended. Salasov was among those who didn't pass Latin, Old Slavonic, and historical grammar. At first he was very worried, began feverishly studying his textbooks to quickly make up his incompletes, but then he cooled off and spent all his free time with Inna. She came to the dormitory often; sitting on his bed, she looked pensively through the window, while he, forgetting everything, recited her his verses.

Once Inna arrived at the dormitory earlier than usual, and Salasov hadn't yet returned from the university. She leafed through his notebooks of verse. Right then the door opened and Lyuda walked in. When she saw Inna in the room, she got embarrassed and asked in a quiet voice, completely losing her head:

"Where's Vitya?"

"What Vitya?" Inna was astonished and stared suspiciously at Lyuda. "And what do you want with Vitya?"

"Oh, nothing..." Lyuda said, completely embarrassed, and ran out.

"Who was that girl who dropped in to see you?" Inna asked Salasov when he returned. "She came and whined, 'Do you know where Vitya is?' Who is she?"

"What girl?"

"Small, but with big eyes... Did I guess right?" she grew angry. "She's an acquaintance of yours?"

"I don't know. She's probably from our class. She comes and sits sometimes. She looks out the window and doesn't say anything. I don't know why she comes here. It's not to see me, in any case."

"But I understood at once: she came to see you. I understood at once. Do you hear? We can't go on like this. You've been neglecting your studies, and I'm not doing so brilliantly either. We have to do something. We can't just sit idle."

"What can we do?" Salasov shrugged his shoulders. "Shall we go away? To a construction project in Siberia? We'll find good jobs and work for a while. All right?"

"No. I won't go to Siberia. Don't start carrying on about that, please. This is what I want to know: aren't the fellows laughing at me? And weren't they the ones who sent that girl with the big eyes here? They sent her to laugh at me."

"Not for anything!" Salasov exclaimed hotly. "Not for anything! I love you. They understand that—this is no ordinary thing, we're going to get married."

He said this loudly, indignantly, and he himself found his thoughts weighty, persuasive.

"But when do you want..." she asked and smiled pitifully, "when do you want to get married?"

"What?"

Salasov had thought about this before; the thought of marriage had often agitated him, for sooner or later he would have to get married, and he didn't know how and when to talk about this to Inna. And here, unexpectedly to himself, he had told her so directly and simply; his hands began to tremble, and he stuck them in his pockets. He even grew frightened. And, not knowing what to answer, he said:

"I'm ready right now."

Inna sat down on the bed silently and looked at him closely, and by the tense way she sat and looked fearfully at him, it was evident that she was also frightened, that she hadn't expected to talk about marriage either. But the

question had been asked, and she completely lost her head.

Salasov stopped by the door and put his hands in his pockets so that Inna wouldn't see how they were trembling, and only then did he realize that Inna really loved him, Salasov, and nobody else. Earlier, although he spent all his time with her, he was constantly afraid of suddenly losing her love.

These thoughts bewildered him, and he asked himself: "Do others really love like this?" Inna looked at him with her eyes which were always sad, as if she pitied him—in any case, this is what he imagined. Theirs was a difficult love. They met every day, but every time he wasn't sure that she would come. And when she came all the same, he cursed himself roundly, believing that only a terrible person could think badly of Inna. But now she was sitting next to him and looking at him, and he knew about this and was thinking of her love. But what next?

"Inna," Salasov said. "Inna."

"Well?" she asked and burst out laughing. "Well, Salasov, what do you have to say? Where will we live? Well, all right, we'll find a solution. It's a difficult situation, but we have to do something. The main thing is not to dit idle. You always have to do something. Right?"

She fell silent. Someone's hurried steps could be heard in the corridor.

"We'll take care of the application today," Inna whispered. "Today, do you hear? I can just imagine how my mama will protest."

"Well, yes," Salasov agreed.

Someone came to the door and knocked loudly.

"Salol!" some fellow shouted. "Someone's waiting for you downstairs."

"Coming," Salasov answered and ran out into the corridor.

He stopped on the second floor, sat down in an armchair in the hall, and, moving it towards the window, pressed his face against the icy glass. He sat that way for about five minutes, coming to his senses.

"How happy I am! How happy! Nobody is loved like me. Nobody! Do you hear, Lobakov and Khmara? Nobody!"

On the first floor some fellows were talking on the sofa

near the porter; a tall girl was standing by the wall newspaper and reading it; a woman in a black padded jacket, black scarf, and felt boots was sitting next to the porter and listening to her attentively.

"Elizaveta Dmitrievna, who asked for me?" Salasov asked.

Elizaveta Dmitrievna looked at Salasov in surprise and then at the woman in the padded jacket. Salasov also glanced at the woman, and something seemed to tug at his heart. "Who does she look like?" he thought. "What a familiar face."

"Vitenka," the tearful eyes of the woman in the padded jacket began blinking very quickly. "Vitenka!"

"Mama?" Salasov asked, not understanding how she could have turned up here. "Mama! What are you doing here?"

"Vitenka! Are you alive and well, my precious son? And I thought, my dear. . ." She rushed up to her son. "My precious son, is it you? Is it you?"

Mother ran to the porter, took her suitcase, with a rope tied around it for security, and hurried up to her son.

"My precious son, why, I didn't even recognize you! I couldn't believe my eyes. I thought, he looks so much like my Vitenka after all, and that's who it was. Lordie, may my eyes fall out of my head. I didn't recognize my own son. Can you believe it? Could I have imagined you would be this way? Could I have imagined? You're so skinny, you're a regular skeleton. God forbid. I brought you some bacon, son. Lordie, there I was riding here, and I thought with all my heart and soul: how is he? Is he alive?" She began crying loudly. "You're as skinny as a skeleton, my son! How can that be? Who let such a disgraceful thing come about?"

"Quiet, Mama!" Salasov was frightened, looking around, and, convinced that none of his acquaintances were nearby, sighed in relief. "Quiet, Mama! Why, what's the matter? Do you think I'm a corpse or something? Why are you carrying on, Mama? You're making so much noise, as if you were at home."

When they reached the third floor, Salasov put the suitcase and basket down in the hall, sat down in the armchair, and looked at his mother.

"Well, how are you all at home, Mama?" he asked. "How did you come? So you decided on such a trip? And in the winter too? You weren't thinking at all. They said somebody was asking for me, but it didn't even occur to me that it was you. Why did you come?"

"The money I sent came back," she clapped her hands. "Well, I thought something's wrong there, what if he's in the hospital, and among strangers? Pah-pah, it shouldn't happen... And the handwriting, it wasn't your handwriting on the letter. My heart went thump! When your father was killed in the war my heart thumped the same way when I slept at night! 'That's all,' I thought. And then he was killed. And besides, the handwriting on the letter wasn't yours, Vitenka. It was an official handwriting on the notice, how could that be? Where did you get the money so you could send mine back? How did it come back? Something is wrong here, I thought."

"I sent it back myself," Salasov said.

"You could have used it more, Vitenka."

"The things that come into your head!"

"Lord, king of heaven, oh my God, I know how it is with students!" the old woman said, sitting down next to her son and trying to catch his every glance. She sat down and stood up again. "Why, he's just like a skeleton, as if they're taken him down from the cross. Can you believe it? And the higher ups, what are they doing? It's clear where the higher ups are looking. God gracious, why has the Lord God punished me this way?" The old woman crossed herself quickly. "As if they're taken him down from the cross!"

"On top of everything else—you have to cross yourself," Salasov became angry. "And dressed that way, in that jacket of yours. Couldn't you wear something a little better?"

"But it's new, just think, Vitenka! I bought it last year."

She took off a black cloth scarf, then a knitted triangular kerchief, then a linen scarf which she had made herself, then a white, washed-out kerchief. She had thin, gray hair, it turned out. Without her scarf and kerchiefs the wrinkles on her weather-beaten face became more noticeable. Only now did Salasov understand how old his moth-

er was; it never occurred to him that his mother would age eventually and would turn into a dried-out old woman with gray hair.

"Whatever brought you here, Mama?" he said irritably and hid his face in his mother's shoulder.

Somebody came stamping down the corridor, and Salasov became ashamed of his weakness and stood up. The old woman, looking with tearful, repentant eyes, said:

"Lordie, I didn't remember by precious son! It's unheard of! How can a mother not recognize her own chick? Look what has become of my son. Why, who looks after him, there's no one to give him food and drink..."

Salasov scanned the corridor. What could he do? He didn't want to take his mother to his room—Inna was sitting there. Unexpectedly, he decided not to introduce Inna to his mother; he was ashamed that his mother was dressed in an old padded jacket, a cloth scarf, and thick-soled deerskin boots too big for her feet. All together, she, this little old woman whom he loved, was so countrified that he began to feel uneasy both about her and about himself, and he was ashamed of the padded jacket, boots, and scarves, of how she spoke, although he loved his mother, loved everything she was wearing, because it reminded him of home, of the village, without which his life was unthinkable, reminded him of something near and dear. But he was also ashamed of everything which he loved, ashamed of things which were near and dear. It was a strange feeling...

Inna came out into the corridor—in a Japanese synthetic mink coat with a hat to match, and suede boots. The difference in dress between Inna and his mother was so striking that Salasov definitely decided not to introduce them.

"What are you doing?" Inna asked.

"Why, you see, I..."

"Someone's come to see you?"

"Why, you see... You know, Inna, I'm going to be held up today".

"Why, Viktor?"

"You understand, it's turned out that people have come, I don't know, and now I myself, you understand... It

all happened unexpectedly somehow, I even lost my head. Shall we meet this evening? I wanted to tell you one more thing, but it'll have to wait. Shall we meet this evening? In the same place. All right?"

Inna nodded and left. Salasov picked up the suitcase and basket and headed for his room.

"Who's she?" the old woman asked, walking in behind him.

"Who is she? Why, no one in particular. . ."

Why was he doing all this—lying and being evasive? Salasov was experiencing a strange, incomprehensible feeling, which made him uncomfortable and which he didn't know how to rid himself of. He should have introduced his mother to his future wife, and now he wasn't telling his mother the truth.

The old woman unfastened the suitcase and dragged out his clothes from before the army—a shirt, two pairs of pants, and almost unworn jacket.

"These things are for you, Vitenka, everything will come in so handy, I brought everything. . ."

From the basket his mother extricated bacon, meat, a stewed chicken, tartlets, and even his favorite noodles which she had prepared—all he would have to do is throw them in some soup.

"Sit down, son, and eat," she said, and ran to look where to put all this. "Why, you don't even have a stove here?" she looked around in surprise. "If they had put in a little one, at least, everything would have been much better."

"Take off your jacket, Mama, and I'll take you to the kitchen."

She took off her padded jacket, under which his father's pre-war jacket, fastened with an enormous pin, appeared.

"Take it off, it's so old!" Salasov was exasperated.

Under the jacket was a woolen cardigan, a wedding gift, and under the cardigan a new flannel blouse—all with a large pleated skirt, also new.

"You've made me take off almost all of my clothes," the old woman laughed. "Yes, you did. Where's your bed, so I can put all this on it? Oh, what soft beds. Look, you can sleep on them. And I thought they would lay you out in a row on the floor like suckling pigs. Some students

live even worse than that, they say. There's nothing to eat, nowhere to sleep, they lead a dog's life for five whole years, and then they get sick, and when they finish their studies there's no time to work as a boss even, it's time to die."

The old woman found a pot in the cupboard. It was Lobakov's, in which he boiled various nutritious suppers and dinners.

"Take it, take it. The pot belongs to one of the boys. He cooks soups in it."

In the kitchen the old woman became flustered. It was clean and there were two large gas stoves. The walls, covered with Dutch tiles, gleamed.

"Well, how does this work and where?" his mother asked in amazement, rushing up to the stove, staring at it, and shaking her head.

Salasov showed her how to light the burner.

In half an hour Salasov was eating noodle soup; his mother sat in a chair and watched him eat.

"You eat too," Salasov said. "Does the family write? Why don't you speak, Mama?"

"Well, you know, everybody writes but Pavel. He's grown proud now that they've made him head of a motor transport depot. But everyone else lets me know what's happening to them. Some write less and some more, but why feel hurt if they don't forget their mother. Maria and Niurka and Liza and Tishka and Shurka ... they all write."

"Do they help you?"

"Why what for, I'm not a beggar, after all. I have chickens and sheep and two goats—I have everything. Why should they help? Couldn't be any better. And I just have myself. All alone." She shed a few tears and covered her eyes with her handkerchief. "And so I got it in my poor head that you had gotten sick, and there was no one to change my mind or take pity. All alone. Nobody close in the whole village, just acquaintances. I could let out a howl or shout with all my might and no one would hear. It's specially scary in the winter, son—I'm old already. The only one in the whole house. Pop built the house himself, and what a house! Pop made it to last forever, so his grand-

sons' grandsons would live in it. What a house! It's so fine, no one would even call it a hut. May God give everyone such a house. And the livestock were real cold in the barn. 'Cause it's very, very big, like the collective farm's. If you want you can keep a hundred cows in the stalls. Your papa built it too! The whole village was green with envy 'cause each of our children was healthier than the one before, and besides, your father didn't drink and was hard-working. How did we live? The right way! So I was happy, we had a good life, son, especially before the war. He never hurt my feelings. But after the war I had a comedown... Eat, eat, sonny. I thought, I might go and live with relatives, but Liza's husband was a drunkard. 'Don't come,' she says, 'I'm going to leave him soon myself.' I said to her: 'Why, how can you leave your husband? God will punish you—do you think you can live down such a disgrace?', but she didn't want to listen to me, her husband had really worn her out. Nowadays everybody is awfully educated, independent, but I don't see much use in it. And how am I going to help you? I don't know. I think about you. When I got the money back, there was such a thump in my breast! Well, I thought, I made him mad. I sold some things at the bazaar in Omsk and set out."

"I'm not going to take your last ruble from you. I said—I'm not going to! Better buy something for yourself! A new dress. I'll think of something."

"How much do I need?" the old woman clapped her hands and rose, still not taking her eyes from her son. Then she sat down and, interrupting her thought, grabbed her stomach.

"What's the matter with you?" Salasov was frightened.

"Someone's tugging in my belly. He grabs and then lets go right away. My appetite has also disappeared. And it hurts here, at the waist. I've lived my years, son, I've given birth to ten and brought them up. I didn't much look after my health."

The pain soon passed and she began to fuss and run around the room. Salasov sat on his bed and thought how inconvenient his mother's arrival was.

It got on towards evening. Less than an hour remained

before his meeting with Inna. Should he leave his mother alone? The fellows would come—what would they think?

"When are you planning to go home?" Salasov asked.

"Why, what do you think, I'm ready to go tomorrow. I had a look and that'll do. Thank God, you're alive and well."

Salasov got up from the bed and began walking about the room. He had a worried look.

"If you have to go somewhere, hurry off," his mother said. "Don't think about me, son. Go ahead, don't put it off."

"I'll be going," he said. "If two fellows come, say you're my mother. Mama, don't be afraid, I'll come soon."

"All right, Vitenka, but will it be convenient? After all, I'm a stranger to them. Maybe I should stay in the corridor?"

When the old woman saw that he put on a raincoat, she clapped her hands:

"You'll be cold, Vitenka! It's really freezing outside!"

"It has a warm lining. Everyone dresses this way today."

"Everyone," she shook her head and crossed herself. "People aren't what they used to be. How can that be? They're no bargain."

Inna was already waiting for him. It was a blue Moscow twilight, and a light snow was falling. Inna was wearing a blue coat with a fox collar. She looked at Salasov hurrying towards her and smiled while waiting.

"Well, Salasov," she said slyly, winking, "I hinted to father, hinted very subtly, of course. He blabbed to mother, whispered to her from joy. Mother is rather strange, she believes I was created for someone else. She has a mass of interesting qualities, but like any other mother she wants only good for her babe, although they say that the road to hell is paved with good intentions."

Salasov was silent. He regretted that he had left his mother alone in the dormitory—he didn't have to meet Inna today. He didn't understand himself. He was glad to see Inna, but as soon as he thought of his mother his heart

became heavy: she had travelled here for two days, and he had run to a rendezvous. Inna seemed to guess Salasov's desire and thoughts.

"Listen, Viktor, shall we go home? On a day like today we should go to bed early and think everything over. We'll file the application and go home. Only don't see me home. I'll be thinking of only one thing on the way and also when I'm home, lying in bed. You think about me all the time. Agreed?"

"Yes," Salasov answered.

They handed in the application at the registry office, wandered around the park for a long time, and then crossed Krymsky Bridge. Inna asked now and then:

"Do you love me?"

"Very much. I've never loved anyone else."

After he had accompanied Inna to the trolleybus, he ran to the dormitory. On the way Salasov kept repeating: "I love her very, very much. I do."

Mother was sitting on a chair and watching Lobakov prepare supper for himself. When he saw Salasov enter, Lobakov said:

"I took advantage of the moment. I don't need a plate. I eat right from the pot, so as not to disturb by an incautious movement the high-caloric assemblage of vitamins. After dinner I go to sleep and have splendid dreams, which significantly improve my health, which is good already. And when I go to work, I also work quite well."

"People here are completely different," the old woman shook her head. "They don't dress like real people. And how they eat—my goodness! If your pop saw it, he would die of laughter."

Lobakov ate and went on duty. Salasov picked up a textbook. His mother lay down on his bed, not taking her eyes off her son, and sighed heavily. No matter how much she looked at him, she could not imagine how he lived and what interested him.

"When your university days end, what will you do?" She asked what she wanted to know for a long time. But could never make up her mind to ask, although she was bursting with curiosity.

"I don't know yet. But I want to be a journalist. I have many plans, Mama. I want real work, which I would love, but I haven't yet decided what exactly. I write poetry, you know."

"What kind of poetry?"

"Just poems, with rhymes. Well, how can I explain it to you. . . Well, lyric poems."

"If only your pop knew. . . In all our lives none of us has ever made up poems. He never saw you once. But you're his spitting image."

"Mama, when I finish studying, I'll take you and we'll live together."

"God willing it'll be as you say. I've raised so many children, they should at least pamper their mother with letters. Well, go to sleep, why have I started complaining—other people have it even worse, all my children are independent. What an old fool, she's no bargain!"

Early in the morning the old woman began getting ready to go to the station. Salasov saw her off. She looked around at the people in the subway and sighed softly, and when they arrived at Kazan Station, she said:

"All the same, son, not everyone goes around in rain-coats, some are wearing warm coats. Buy yourself one. I'll go now and sell a sheep, meat is very costly nowadays, so buy yourself a warm coat. For my sake, son, or pop's. I ask you, for God's sake. Don't hurt your mother, my soul won't rest easy if I know you're not properly dressed."

They bought a ticket quickly—there were plenty of empty seats on the train. Salasov took his mother to see Moscow. Looking at the people hurrying about their business, his mother was amazed:

"Where are they all panting off to, poor things? Well, where, I ask you. All they do is run and run. Vitenka, is there whole grain bread, by any chance, in the grocery stores? In our parts they only bake bread from wheat, you can't find whole grain bread, no matter how hard you try, and I've grown so used to it. Old Medvedikha was dying—you know her—and she kept asking: 'Give me a little rye bread before I pass to the other world'."

The old woman bought some rye bread. They arrived at the station on time; the train would be leaving at any mo-

ment. Salasov stood by the car window and looked at his mother through the glass; she kept wiping the tears from her eyes, trying to get her fill of looking at him.

"Vitenka, take care of yourself, son. . ."

Salasov wanted to tell his mother about his marriage, but couldn't. He felt a tightness in his throat and, looking at his mother, tears came streaming down his cheeks.

"Vitenka, I'll send money to you all the same. What do I need sheep for? So you can have what everybody else does. And tomorrow I might not need anything anymore."

Salasov didn't answer. He began feeling so sorry for his mother, who had come yesterday and was already leaving today, that he couldn't endure it and turned away. The people standing nearby couldn't understand why the tall young fellow was crying.

"Mama, I'm getting married," he said, but the train was already moving.

Salasov began running after the car, still looking at his mother, trying to understand whether she heard him. She didn't hear, but made the sign of the cross over him and said something through her tears.

VII

Salasov had the sensation that he was saying goodbye to his mother for ever. He felt he was at fault and understood that he had no right to let his mother go, at least so quickly, and should have introduced her to Inna, his future wife, and done more besides to make things pleasant for her. He understood all this, but he couldn't do anything with himself, and his conscience tormented him. Salasov met Lyuda in the reading hall of the university. She walked past, not noticing him, but suddenly returned and asked:

"Vitya, what's the matter with you? You look terrible. Lobakov said your mother arrived. Is it true?"

"First of all, I don't look terrible!" Salasov didn't understand whom he was so angry with.

"Vitya! . . ." Lyuda looked down for an instant and headed for the exit.

Salasov returned his books and ran out of the reading hall.

In the dormitory the porter said that he had visitors. Salasov began to feel good and light-hearted because he thought it could be no one but Inna. But it was Pulkherin, sitting in a chair in his room and listening to Khmara, who was loudly reading his poetry. From time to time the candidate said:

"Good. That little poem is simply marvelous. You have an excellent feeling for rhythm. Of course, you're especially successful in writing small quatrains."

Salasov sat down on his bed without taking off his raincoat.

"Old man!" Khmara shouted. "He really digs poetry!"

"Since he praised you, it means he really digs it," Salasov answered, and thought, "What did he come for?"

"Why, hello," the candidate said joyfully, giving Salasov a strong handshake. "Viktor and I have to talk privately," he addressed Khmara.

"I can abandon this habitation for a number of hours," Khmara said and left.

"I'm a frank person," the candidate smiled, "I'll say right out that I've come on account of several of your moves, that is, speaking simply, I have..."

"Has something happened to Inna?"

"For heaven's sake, everything is all right," the candidate calmed him down. "Her mother came to me last night and told me everything, of course, that is, that you're getting married. I came to see you because of that. Is the goal of my totally unexpected visit clear to you now?"

"Well," Salasov answered gloomily, "the fact that we're getting married concerns us alone."

"I understand that perfectly. I've always had a high opinion of you," the candidate continued. "Bearing in mind that you possess a gift for analysis rare in poets, who are used to thinking in images, you will understand me. I didn't come from egoistic motives. I was always struck by your attitude towards Inna. Don't try to misinterpret my words. Frankly speaking, I'm no master at speaking about such things. I'm excellent at stating my ideas on paper, but I'm incapable of speaking, especially on intimate matters. But all the same—why did you decide to get married? Any gifted man who later gains experience suffers

most of all from self-reproach. He is his own highest judge. You'll bitterly regret that you got married. Yes, Yes! You'll re-gre-e-et it! Believe me, you're not made for one another."

The candidate spoke loudly, calmly, in a measured tone, got up several times, and walked around the room.

"Why did you come?" Salasov asked, scowling at him.

The candidate put on his English coat, gray with a large brown check and an astrakhan peaked cap.

"Let's leave the room," he asked. "Please. I'm suffocating here."

It was quiet on the street, and a light snow was falling. The candidate stopped a taxi.

"Shall we go?" the candidate invited Salasov and got in the taxi.

The taxi stopped at the Prague Restaurant.

"Shall we go in and have a bite?" the candidate asked.

"I very much want you to come."

Salasov wanted to refuse, but a feeling of curiosity got the upper hand. They entered the wide doors, covered with gleaming bronze, went up the carpeted staircase with its polished bronze decorations, turned into a long corridor with immense mirrors, and found themselves in the dining hall. The candidate ordered turkey with apples, caviar, salmon, cognac, and dry wine. Salasov looked around: this was the first time in his life that he had been in a restaurant and seen such beautifully dressed waiters.

"Let's have a drink and down it with the salmon." The candidate poured cognac into the glasses. "To our friendship! Another person's family won't be of any use to you, old man. Especially a family like that. Inna isn't a bad broad, of course..."

"How dare you call her a broad!" Salasov jumped up. "For saying things like that, you know..."

"I know, old-timer. I take my words back. I understand more about life. I have experience, knowledge. And I offer you friendship. All right? Inna gave me your poems to read. Frankly speaking, they're good. That's my taste, of course."

They brought the turkey with apples. The candidate took a drink and shook his head, as if shaking off inebriation.

"Woman is a riddle," he continued. "You talk to her about earth satellites, lasers, biosynthesis, and she'll talk to you about clothes. I thought I understood them. Alas! They're the devil's breed, some major poet said, and he was right to some extent. As I understand it, old fellow, first and foremost life is labor. Labor in the sweat of one's brow. Scientific labor. And woman and a family, as I used to understand it, are supplementary. But I was wrong. It's either a family or science, poetry—whatever you like, but only one. A man—alas!—is given one thing, and he has to choose—a family or science, a family or poetry. Where were you born?"

"In Siberia. I told you already."

"Siberia! A primordial land. Akademgorodok is in Novosibirsk. 'On the wild bank of the Irtysh sat Ermak, enveloped in thought.' You worked for a year before the army. What did you do?"

"I worked on the collective farm. Just loafed around."

"If I understand it correctly, Viktor, you old-timer, you finished school and then the army! But what about me? I have mountains . . . no, pyramids of books, alien worlds, civilizations. Hundreds of worlds, millions of formulas. An ocean of books! And so what? A mule would kick the bucket from my labors. Whatever you like, but it can't be that my labor is all in vain. If there's war tomorrow it'll all go up in smoke. A pitiable lot. But man cannot live in fear! Only in hope! Hope is life. But you should know that her family, first of all Maria Afanasievna, who rules their miniature state, is against you. She needs a different kind of son-in-law, with regalia. And Inna needs someone with a different character, I don't know what kind, exactly. Strange as it may seem, she needs someone who's not an intellectual."

"Don't talk nonsense!" Salasov was indignant. "You're like a broken record—give her up and give her up! I'm responsible for my own actions. I'm not a child, as you think. What do you want from me?"

"Go on, old-timer."

"I can't live without Inna, do you understand? And you say 'give her up', 'give her up'! I love her, do you understand?"

"Fine, fine, I take it all back," the candidate said, raising his hands. "Waiter! Waiter, the bill!"

He pulled out two ten-ruble notes.

"Keep the change."

Salasov began digging in his pockets, looking for money, but the candidate was already walking towards the exit. While sitting in the taxi, Salasov found money in his side pocket and offered the candidate ten rubles. The latter frowned.

"Give up such cheap gestures. I don't like the theater. Of all theatrical forms I choose just one—music. It is difficult to be false there."

The candidate touched the driver's shoulder and the taxi stopped.

"Here's my telephone number," he said to Salasov. "In the final analysis, man's suffering, his love, is no more than the disturbance of synthesis in certain cells, old-timer. Don't you shout. I never get angry, never shout, always accurately estimate my emotional potential. One must realize that man consists of a definite organization of cells, and one must keep being sober. Successes and failures don't exist in this world, there is only a concurrence of circumstances, old-timer, and when a wall rises up before you, either go around it or climb over it, but keep moving. You mustn't stand under a wall: it might collapse."

"Hey, you chisellers!" the driver shouted as they were walking off. "Who's going to pay?"

Salasov returned and offered him the ten rubles.

"Keep the change," he said and began walking along the street.

Inna was sitting on his bed and Khmara was standing by the window and reasoning:

"Art, as one poet, our respected comrade Hugo, said: 'Verse is the optical form of thought.' But in my opinion art is like walking a tight-rope blindfolded. If you fall to the left, it isn't art, because you'll be crippled. And there's also an abyss on the right. There's only the thin rope in front of you, on which you're walking. This rope is the boundary. If you step one millimeter to the side art disappears. That's what art is—walking a tight-rope blindfolded."

"No, your eyes have to be open," Salasov objected, sitting down next to Inna. "Why blindfolded? You should think when you write, it isn't mysticism. Isn't that true, Inna?"

"True," she answered. "This poet of yours is so strange."

"No, he's marvellous," Salasov said.

"Listen, who was that tall fellow, in the full sense of the word?" Khmara asked. "He called himself a candidate of sciences. I checked him out, of course. 'If you're a candidate,' I said, 'and I'm a student, you undoubtedly have money. Will you lend me twenty-five, because I don't have a kopeck in my pocket? For the most lofty of reasons, it goes without saying.' And he up and handed me twenty-five! I was joking, but he took me seriously."

"Who was that?" Inna grew animated.

"The candidate," Salasov answered.

"Pulkherin?" Inna was amazed. "That's news, my dear! How did he find you?"

VIII

Salasov didn't sleep all night; he got up often, walked along the corridor, and kept thinking and thinking. His failures at the university and the conversation with the candidate were already forgotten—he was disturbed only by upcoming events. He hadn't told the fellows about his marriage yet; he was waiting until morning to make the announcement. He felt the solemnity of the moment and was flustered, because earlier everything had seemed amazingly simple, but now it had become frightening and somehow undefined. He examined his jacket, pants, and shirt dozens of times, and now and then Inna, Evgeni, and Pulkherin loudly slamming the taxi door arose in his consciousness. Now that everything was decided how would they regard his marriage? "No, no," Maria Afanasievna had said to Inna. "I don't want your husband to be a peasant. No, he's certainly no match for you."

"Why does Maria Afanasievna object? I hope, in the final analysis, it's not a question of money," he said once

to Inna, feeling how unpleasant it was to talk about money. It had always seemed to him, after all, that in general people in love couldn't talk about anything petty, especially about money—it might degrade their love. "I can always go to work."

"Of course, my dear," Inna answered. "We won't have a wedding reception, we'll just register the marriage and that's all."

After getting his shirt and pants in order, he shaved, sat down on his bed, and remained there until Khmara woke up.

"Why aren't you sleeping, Salo?" he asked, rubbing his eyes. "Your incompletes aren't letting you sleep? Yes, you really did yourself in, three subjects—that's not just a pound of Uzbek raisins. But remember Onegin's words:

Don't destroy yourself in vain labors
But love yourself.

Think of yourself, Salo, and everything else will come. There will be difficulties, of course, but you have to look at them dialectically: 'There can be no evil without good.'"

Salasov paced about the room, then sat down on the bed and said:

"No, it's something else. I'm getting married, Khmara."

"Oh, lay off it!" Khmara burst out in a peal of laughter. "You've never been much of a joker, but now you've shown your ability."

Lobakov returned from his night duty.

"Salo is getting married!" Khmara began to yell. "He mixed up the day. He thought today was April first! Ha-ha!"

Lobakov took off his coat, clapped his hands against his sides, and only then did he look at Salasov.

"What?" he asked. "Did that flibbertigibbet ensnare you? She changed fur coats like gloves. She has about ten fur coats. How many fur coats does she have?"

"I didn't count. But don't forget—nobody ensnared me. All of you get away from me! I thought you would go to the registry office with me like friends, but you've started this gypsy farce."

"Can't we have a little joke, gentlemen?" Lobakov said. "She has four fur coats. I counted them. So? Fine. You won't have to spend as much money on her clothes. Even Pushkin became entangled in debts because of women's clothes. Even Pushkin! And she's all right, a nice girl, then's only one flow—she's a native Muscovite. They're all a little whacky, I'm telling you. Television, radio, movies, actors, writers, first-hand information—all this affects the Moscow population. The one who would make an ideal wife and follow her husband like the Decembrists' wives is Lyudochka. I could have probably married her."

"Who's stopping you? Go and offer her your hand and heart of gold." Salasov said angrily.

"She doesn't love me," Lobakov answered, getting a suit, shirt, and new yellow shoes from the closet. "I'm not the one she loves, old man. That's the trouble."

"Who then?"

"That's the point. You . . . put on my new shirt."

He had to hurry. When they were already at the subway Khmara caught up with him:

"What, you really weren't lying? Then I'll go with you. I love performances."

Inna, Evgeni, and his girl friend were already waiting near the registry office. Inna was wearing a polar fox coat, not synthetic this time. When she saw Salasov approach she didn't greet him, but headed for the registry office at once.

"Congratulations," Evgeni shook Salasov's hand and then offered his hand to Lobakov and Khmara, repeating: "My sister's brother. My sister's brother." After this he proposed in a dignified tone that they enter the registry office, took his girl by the arm, and slowly walked up the stairs. Salasov noticed that Inna was angry at him for being late.

"I shouldn't have to wait for you, in any case!"

Salasov took her by the arm and was about to justify himself, when it was suggested that they go into the next room, then into another one: a tall old man in glasses talked about the happiness of married life, and Salasov had not yet found the opportunity to explain everything to Inna.

The door to the Pataevs' apartment was wide open, and a group of men in new suits and ties, smoking and laughing loudly at their own jokes, were standing on the trampled stair landing. In the corridor two slightly inebriated men with resolute faces demanded redemption for the bride, a woman joined them and began shouting shrilly:

"They have no shame! They don't give redemption! It's simply terrible dealing with such people!"

"What kind of comedy is this?" Inna asked Evgeni. "What kind of comedy?"

Khmara and Lobakov didn't have vodka with them, they exchanged embarrassed glances and pretended that they were very merry, that they found all of this very funny, although their confused appearance suggested the opposite. Salasov didn't understand anything:

"Inna, we agreed, that there would be no drinking, didn't we? None at all! We agreed, didn't we?"

"I don't know. Your favorite—my father—has organized this idiotic game. He loves such things. The more noise and shouting the better he likes it." Inna was angry at Salasov for asking her and was angry at the people standing at the doors and yelling. And something was burning and sizzling in the kitchen, from which pungent gray smoke was crawling into the corridor and rising towards the ceiling, as if frightened by the shouting, noise, and bustle... Finally Ilya Savelievich, flushed and satisfied, appeared in the doorway with two bottles of vodka.

"Where's Lavchikov?" Ilya Savelievich began shouting. "Did he greet you at the threshold with bread and salt? No, he didn't? Son of a bitch! Where did he disappear? Where's Lavchikov!"

Ilya Savelievich, wearing a gray suit and white shirt, his thin, scented hair sticking up in all directions on his half bald head and a pink blush spreading all over his cheeks, was somewhat ashamed of his drunken appearance and, in order to conceal it, he fussed, laughed excessively, slapped the guests standing nearby on the shoulder, and said:

"My children! My children, I'm so happy! Innochkal! He's like a son to me. He's like my own son. Masha! Vitya is like my own son! Do you hear, Mama?" he said, em-

bracing Salasov and kissing him on the forehead, lips, and cheeks. "How inexpressibly happy I am! I've always been happy, but now especially. There's no one happier than I am in Moscow! Such a son-in-law is just what we needed, good people. Live a hundred years and more! Thank God, we have enough to eat, we live well, you might say. This is just what we needed, how happy I am!"

Maria Afanasievna, wearing a new jersey suit, spike-heeled shoes, her dyed hair arranged in an incredible hairdo, approached, kissed Inna, and shed a few tears.

"Well," she said, "come in. I think everything will turn out all right, Inna. All the best to you, Innochka."

... Tables stretched down the full length of the room. Salasov and Inna sat at the head of the tables and quietly laughed at everybody; everything seemed funny and absurd to them—the people, and the tables, and the vodka with hors d'oeuvres. During the first minutes the invited guests sat silently at the table, tried out the vodka and hors d'oeuvres, and proposed quiet toasts, suitable to the occasion. Ilya Savelievich walked along the tables and loudly coaxed them:

"Drink, good people, eat. Come on! Eat. But I don't need anything. I am drunk with joy!"

Lobakov silently applied himself to the sausage, while Khmara, once he had a bit to drink, wanted to express himself, but couldn't find the right moment. But then he stood up and uttered:

The hostess now is my ideal,
And my desires are for peace,
A pot of cabbage soup so large. . .

"Did he write that himself?" Inna asked softly, when everyone had shouted "bitter" and demanded that the bride and bridegroom kiss without fail.

They moved the tables. It was noisy everywhere. Some people stood, some sat and muttered to themselves, while others drank silently.

Salasov didn't know new dances, and was afraid of disgracing himself. Maria Afanasievna approached Inna and began to whisper something in her ear. Inna first blushed and then grew pale. Salasov went over to the fellows.

"You've donned the fetters of Hymen," Khmara said. "You know, Vitya, I wanted to steal Inna away from you. I didn't think you were getting married. You're secretive, after all—you were silent until the last moment."

"Who imagined it?" Lobakov assented, looking around at the guests as if taking the measure of everything. "The family isn't poor. What a television and a piano! And a mirrored sideboard. Where do they get their money, the beasts? That's nonsense. I'm trying to determine what kind of people they are by their things. What kind of family is it? Love is blind, but life has eyes."

"Be quiet!" Khmara shouted at him. "You can't guess about somebody's soul by things."

"You don't understand humor," Lobakov was offended. "Oh, you! Tell me what kinds of things you like, and I'll tell you what you are, Khmara. A thing is a reflection of a man's thoughts and emotions. A thing is a poor copy of him. Understand?"

"Here I am a husband, boys," Salasov began laughing. "Honestly, I can't believe it. It's as if nothing has happened. Honestly, you weirdos."

Salasov looked at Khmara and Lobakov, trying to understand how he, now a married man, differed from them. He liked all these people yelling and drinking, and wanted to stand up and tell them that he loved them. He stood up and walked along the tables, touching now one, now another of them, and smiling at absolutely everyone, thought to himself:

"How stupid and happy my mug must look!"

"Salasov, come here!" Inna shouted.

Salasov came to his senses and approached Inna.

"Well?" he asked. "What, Inna? Inna, it's even hard for me to say..."

Maria Afanasievna sat next to Inna and looked at Salasov attentively. Her face was worried.

"Mama wants to know how you look upon your life," Inna asked and burst out laughing. Describe to her in brief your minimum. Well, first of all, she is very interested in when and where you're going to work?"

"I'm ready to begin tomorrow," Salasov answered and smiled.

...Ten or twelve people remained in the room. The candidate came in unexpectedly with a large bouquet of white roses. He nodded from afar at the sleeping Ilya Savelievich, Khmara, and someone else, then approached Inna and handed her the bouquet. The roses were very beautiful.

"I'm extremely glad," he said, addressing Inna and then Salasov. He spoke hurriedly, breathing as heavily as if he had been running for a long time.

"Where did you buy them, Kirill Nikolaevich?" Maria Afanasievna asked, standing up. "What roses! How lovely. Just amazing. White snow and white roses. It's just so lovely!"

"I bought them from a Georgian at the Central Market," Pulkherin answered.

"How white and pure they are, well, aren't they lovely!" Maria Afanasievna was amazed. "As white as sunlight. It would be interesting to know if there are people with such a pure conscience?"

"Mama," Inna answered reproachfully, "rest easy, there are."

"Maria Afanasievna, the color white is not really so white," the candidate said, sitting down on a chair next to her. "When Newton put the color white through a prism it turned out not to be white. It broke down. For people life is a prism. When he's put through the meat grinder which we call life—then a man shows himself."

"Pulkherin, have you ever put yourself through a meat grinder?" Inna asked loudly. "Well, tell us, have you? How interesting it all is!"

Evgeni approached. Reeling, he shook the candidate's hand.

"When the apple banged Newton on his bald spot," Evgeni said and laughed loudly, "he... what did he do to it? He lost his temper and ate it. These scientists are an awfully stupid bunch. Awfully stupid!"

"You think so?" the candidate asked, trying very hard to look as if he wasn't insulted, as if this didn't relate to him at all.

He behaved quite well, and only his pale, pinched face betrayed his agitation. Maria Afanasievna looked Evgeni up and down contemptuously and muttered through her teeth:

"You're soused again. You parasite, when are you going to stop this disgraceful behavior?"

"Me?" Evgeni was amazed. "I'm not at all drunk. May God strike me down! May the most terrible lightning slay me this very instant!"

Everyone began feeling uncomfortable. Some drunken fellow approached Maria Afanasievna and for a long time tried to understand who was before him.

"Who is this?" she asked. "Drunken men are wandering around our apartment, and nobody knows them. You don't even see such types in our store."

"He's our common friend," Evgeni answered. "Our common friend. His name? His name is man!"

"It's just like a village!" Maria Afanasievna was angry. "All my life your father only caused me pain. You're so stupid, irresponsible, coarse!"

"Nobody, Maria Afanasievna, can understand people," the candidate said. "Nobody! A man might drink, but this drinker might be a genius. The outer shell, Maria Afanasievna, is very deceptive. He's always dressed in a soiled jacket, wrinkled pants, and a soiled shirt, but he's a genius. He's Mendeleev! It often happens. I'll tell you the following: you can measure the universe to within a millimeter, you can measure the lifetime of the universe, but it's impossible to measure a man's soul. It's immeasurable. There is something in it which doesn't lend itself to measurement. And what is most dangerous—it has certain recesses which only its possessor may enter. The soul, Maria Afanasievna! It has been said not without reason that 'another's soul is darkness'. Darkness is just what it is, Maria Afanasievna! You have to walk in the dark with a lantern. But where is that lantern?"

Maria Afanasievna looked at the candidate very severely and intelligently, and evidently didn't understand anything. Sometimes she looked around at Inna, who was looking severely and thoughtfully at the ceiling. Pulkherin spoke with inspiration, looking straight ahead, and was obviously agitated. Only Lobakov and Khmara weren't listening to him. They were quietly arguing about something. The candidate's speech obviously didn't touch them.

"How passionately you speak!" Maria Afanasievna ut-

tered with a sigh. "You're an exceptional orator. You're a marvel! I've always admired you. One should learn how to live from you, Kirill Nikolaevich."

"I don't know how to live," the candidate answered, his voice trembling. "I don't know how at all."

"Why, what are you saying?"

"Now, Khan Girei was one who knew how to live," Evgeni inserted. "He had six hundred concubines. And what were they all? They were all his wives. Six hundred wives! As soon as one of them started to grow old, what did he do? Off with her head."

"You're always talking nonsense," Maria Afanasievna dismissed him. "I don't know when you'll get some brains. Viktor, just look how Kirill Nikolaevich is dressed! Everything is so impeccable and splendid! And you're wearing a shirt... Your undershirt is visible through the nylon. Is that the right way to do things?"

Khmara approached Maria Afanasievna and stared at her quite unceremoniously.

"Well, old man, we're going," Lobakov began dragging Khmara away by force. Salasov accompanied them to the stair landing and returned.

IX

Salasov woke up towards morning and tossed and turned for a long time. Every time he seemed to be falling asleep he heard the difficult breathing of the old neighbor in whose room they were sleeping, and sleep disappeared.

There wasn't the slightest doubt that he had to begin a new life; he was now a husband, in any case, and had to think not only of himself, but of his wife. Only work would make Maria Afanasievna and Inna regard him as a serious man who was concerned about his wife. "So," he said to himself, "it's decided. I'm going to begin work."

As soon as Inna woke up, he announced that he was prepared to get a job that very day.

"Where?" she asked. "What kind of work? Viktor, you have to find work which, first of all, would be close to your creative work and would contribute to it from the

practical point of view, which, secondly, you wouldn't be ashamed of, and, which, thirdly, should provide material satisfaction."

In the evening, Inna told Maria Afanasievna of Salasov's dream of finding work. Maria Afanasievna gave a deep sigh.

"I'll set you up," Evgeni winked at supper. "Set your mind at ease, my chickadees, I'll set up. We have a nice little job for you."

"As a turner, perhaps?" Inna smiled. "Spare us, dear brother. It's enough that you're a turner. Evidently you're not capable of more. You're a bit short on intellect. To each his own, they say."

"I'm studying too!" Evgeni exclaimed. "And besides, my work is better than some. Our factory has a newspaper. There was a notice posted that they need an editor."

"Go and take a look tomorrow," Inna told Salasov. "But you should regard such work as a transitional stage on the way to, say, *Izvestia*."

On the following day, Evgeni woke Salasov up and they set out for the factory. On the subway, Evgeni said:

"Vitek, she's been fastidious like that ever since childhood. Where does it come from? Father is a simple working man; he's a metal worker. And mother is an ordinary saleswoman, with pretensions, it's true, but her pretensions are just nothing. I'm her brother, but I'm a fellow, and therefore I'm frank. You can tell her my opinion. She won't even be surprised."

"No," Salasov smiled, "you don't understand people. I know her."

"The candidate made the same statement," smiled Evgeni.

Salasov had never been at a factory before and, while waiting for Evgeni to write out a pass for him, he glanced with amazement and impatience at the brick wall enclosing the factory grounds.

"The entrance check-point," Evgeni said, and these words sounded strange to Salasov.

At the entrance check-point, a woman in an army shirt and boots, with a pistol at her side, checked their passes. On the factory grounds, to the right of the entrance check-

point, was a long brick building with enormous windows, behind which some assemblies and people could be seen; tracks were thrown across from the second story of this building to another three-story building, along which trolleys with shavings were moving; along cleared paths people in white and blue overalls and dirty work clothes were hurrying, and motor trolleys were scurrying; far off a white building could be seen, at which overhead electric tracks converged, and not far from the door long packing boxes inscribed "Caution. Keep upright" were piled; old machine tools stood in the same place, and a mountain of oblong pig-iron blocks also lay there.

"Here's my shop," Evgeni said cheerfully. "Do you want me to show it to you?"

As soon as Evgeni opened the door to the shop, dense noise and the smell of warm, oily air enveloped them. Salasov began looking at the machines. He had formerly seen them only in pictures, and here they were! The machine tools were lined up in long rows through the shop.

"Do you know anything about turning?" Evgeni asked.

"No, this is the first time I've ever seen machine tools."

"Don't fib, Vitek. But there's nothing frightening about it. With a good mind, you can learn to work tolerably well in a day. In an hour, if I help you. It's an excellent machine! I'll show you now."

Salasov wasn't listening to him. He looked at the machines, some long and painted a pale green, looking like animals with outstretched necks, which froze in that position, and other small ones under transparent glass...

"They're Japanese machines!" Evgeni shouted, pointing to the small ones. "They're more accurate than watches. And that fat guy over there in black overalls is my foreman Vanya Murygin, he always lets me earn a little extra, and lets me go when necessary. He's a wonderful fellow. He drinks, it's true, but who doesn't play bottleball nowadays! Here's my machine. Eh?!"

Salasov touched the machine. "Well, why don't you turn it on?" he asked.

Evgeni turned on the knife-switch, pressed the button, and the machine began to buzz and vibrate slightly, as if it were mumbling something in confidence.

"Is it working?"

"Just as it should!"

"How many men work here?" Salasov asked, looking around the shop.

"There are two machine shops here. I never counted the people."

The shop was immense, and perhaps that's why it seemed low, its ceiling of long steel welded girders, and immense supporting columns decorated with pale green tiles. If you listened carefully, you could hear an even, heavy sound, as if someone were inhaling, taking in air, but was unable to breathe in his fill...

Salasov looked around and thought: "This is where people really work. This is where miracles are performed! Life revolves around this place. And they, those people at the machine, are the center of that life."

"This is where I'd like to work," Salasov sighed. "This is where..."

"All right. We need piles of machine operators," Evgeni answered quickly, digging into the machine with a key. "Do you want me to sign you on in a split second? I'll say that you've just come from the army like me, that we even served together. They don't like ruffians here, but they grab up fellows from the army, before you can blink an eye. I for one like greasy work like this. You can be a turner, you can do milling, polishing. A turner is a universal artist. I didn't start studying, it's true, from a great love for chemistry, but when you stand here for eight hours, your heels are aching and your back is trembling. It's a mere nothing to wear yourself out. But working until I'm worn out is not for me. It's a difficult, complicated business. It's true that you're afraid of complicated things—you won't work until you're worn out either."

"What does it mean to be worn out, if you really like your work!"

"Work is one thing," Evgeni drawled, opening an iron chest with an enormous lock hanging on it, "you won't find anyone foolish enough to step on his own tail! That's the way I am. This is all my household."

There were boxes of instruments inside the tall chest with two sections, partitioned with shelves.

"What's this?" Salasov asked, touching sharp, gleaming objects. "Aha, they're drills. Right?"

He wanted very much to work here, in this din, to swallow dust, and, who knows, maybe Evgeni was right, and he would write something which nobody had ever written before. And he recalled how formerly, not knowing why himself, he had loved the smell of machine oil—all of that was probably the same call of the city which attracted him now, here among the machines, where the most minute parts were created from which earth satellites, complex automatic machines, robots, rockets would later arise... No, if he retreated now, he wouldn't turn up here again. What material, after all! What one could write about this! He had always felt a certain awe and trembling before technology. When he saw an assembly made up of springs, switches, some kind of intricate mechanisms, he could never grasp, could never imagine, that ordinary fellows made the assembly. Ones like Evgeni. And now, standing in the shop, deafened by the din, he still couldn't imagine it.

"We also work on the space program," Evgeni said, as if answering Salasov's thoughts. "What things we make! I tell you: our work requires great intellect."

The foreman appeared; he was a man of about thirty five, of average height, stout, with narrow blue eyes in his large, scarlet, fleshy face, wearing soiled black overalls which fitted his strong, stout body tightly.

"An apprentice has come to work for us—assign him to me," Pataev fired off, stretching his hand out to the foreman. "We were in the army together, he's my relative. He's very brainy."

"E-eh," the foreman said, and glanced at Salasov. "That's known as a recommendation. It's possible to find work for you. You were in the army? Good. It means you know a thing or two about life, and in general. Fine. I think we'll sign you on. How far did you get in school?"

"He's studying at the university," Pataev answered.

"Don't joke when it's a question of hiring people," the foreman muttered and looked at Salasov once again. The foreman was speaking, but he looked now at the floor, then somewhere to the side, and when he glanced at Salasov

he blinked a lot for some reason. "All the best," he stretched out his big, firm hand. "Sign on. We have a technical college attached to the factory; when it comes to erudition we're in good shape. We'll soon be using the most advanced technology in making parts."

"But he is studying at the university!" Pataev began laughing loudly and pulled Salasov towards the exit. "Oh, our foreman, he can make you die laughing! He himself barely squeaked through the foreman's course, but he pushes everyone into the technical college, and is always expatiating on how important it is to study."

At the personnel office, they demanded certificates from his place of work, study, and residence. Salasov didn't have the certificates. But Pataev tried to prove something to them, explained, threatened to complain to the director, and, when that didn't help, to the Party committee, declaring that he wouldn't leave until they hired a demobilized soldier with outstanding military and political training... He shouted until Salasov was asked: "Do you have a pass? Go to work, and tomorrow you'll bring the certificates and we'll ante-date your papers."

"Whew, I convinced them!" Pataev sighed heavily. "Damned bureaucrats! They squeeze the life out of any vital matter. Every third machine doesn't have an operator, and they make hiring into a merry-go-round. It's not a personnel office, but a zoo. Did you see what mugs they have? When I threatened them with the Party committee, did you see how they lost their nerve? I gave it to them good!"

In the storeroom, they gave Salasov new blue overalls. He looked himself over in the mirror and followed Evgeni. The foreman approached:

"My name is Vanya Murygin."

"Mine is Salasov."

"It'll be good to get to know you. This is your machine. Next to Zhenka's. Here's the key to the chest. Zhenka has already cleaned out all the instruments. He'll give them to you."

Salasov walked around the machine, and felt how tired he was. He wanted to sit down, but there was nothing to sit on.

"There are no chairs or rocking-chairs in the shops,"

Evgeni said. "Come, watch, and learn. All right, I'll make a man of you! Don't be downcast, regard this as temporary work. Something like a forced landing of an airplane. Inka was right when she said transitional work."

Salasov pushed the "start" button. The machine began to work, some levers began to move, revolve, the machine made an even, ordinary noise, as if it had already gotten down to work. Pataev approached and observed Salasov in silence.

"Here," he showed him, "this is the head stock and this is the back one. The back one moves this way and that. It's for centering parts. This, over here, is the support, it holds the cutter holder firm, and, there, I put on the cutter. See how it's fixed. I center it and now I bring it up. You see? It's very simple."

"I see," Salasov began blinking, but didn't understand anything. He got all the names confused.

"Look, a three-jaw chuck. It revolves, and screws itself on. Do you see, Vitek? A half-finished product is inserted in it, a piece of iron—and I can make what I please out of it. I can make your profile. Do you want me to?" Pataev brought the cutting tool up to the half-finished product, and thin shavings began to flow, splashing like water. Smoke rose from the cutting tool. "Do you see, Vitek? It's very simple. Go ahead and take the first filing. Do you want to?"

Salasov stood in Evgeni's place, took hold of the handle, just like him, bent over, and felt his knees begin to tremble and his back break out in a sweat. He brought the cutter up to the turning half-finished product and suddenly ceased to see the cutting tool; unexpectedly for himself he turned the handle more strongly . . . a hissing and trembling began, the machine seemed to howl from pain, it began to shake.

"You've overdriven the cutting tool," Evgeni burst out laughing. "Have you ever seen children learning to walk? That's what you're like, Vitek. Were your knees shaking? . . ."

He looked at the laughing Evgeni, at the machines, at the people, and at this moment it all didn't seem so mysterious, and no longer made him tremble. He had come to study at the university, to gain knowledge, to listen to

lectures by professors and academicians, to improve his mind and reasoning powers, acquire high ideals, not to work at a machine. While he was still studying at school, he imagined life as an immense beautiful building in which very clever fellows and girls come to study the sciences; they sit in beautiful libraries, and read and read, they acquire wisdom, and their life and their gestures—everything about them—is beautiful and grand.

"A turner's work, Vitek, is very delicate, it's like being a jeweller, you might say," Evgeni began speaking, turning on the machine. "You don't only have to understand, but to feel the machine. You can't get by without understanding. It's not like ploughing the earth. Everything seems very simple here, but in fact it's all very delicate."

"Well, you go ahead and plough—that would be interesting!" Salasov answered bitingly. "That would be interesting, I'd like to watch you. Have you ever ploughed even once? No, you haven't. But I've ploughed many times. Both my father and my grandfather ploughed. Whose bread do you eat, I'd like to know? Is it the result of such work, or not?"

"You ploughed, and I ate spice cakes. At five I ate one, and at seven I already ate two spice cakes each time. What a character! In forty six grub was really tight."

"But what did you do when you were five?"

"Nothing. I went to the station and stole coal. I looked after Inna."

"I went weeding, I earned a wage".

"I went to school and looked after Inna. And played football. And you?"

"I weeded, tended the cow, dragged brushwood from the forest. There was a lot of work... And how did you live when you were ten?"

"Things were easier, there was less work than before."

"My brother and I rode on bulls to get straw, I went for firewood and weeded. There was more work than before, and it wasn't easier."

"You make me laugh! You have a great advantage, you worked in the fresh air, you didn't work, but became hardened. That was in the past, but now the work is a little more complicated."

"I'll master this work in a week, understand?" Salasov got angry and decided on the spot to prove to Evgeni that being a turner was not such a difficult speciality; somewhere in the village he would like to laugh at Evgeni just as Evgeni laughed at him.

For a long time Salasov continued to turn the machine on and off, trying various levers and handles. Towards evening he seemed able to work at the machine. He touched the half-finished product with the cutting tool and removed the first shaving.

"Evgeni!" he shouted. "Look!"

"It's time to go home," Evgeni answered lazily, and began to clear off his machine.

On the way home they dropped in at a dining room. It was stifling there from the crowd of people, and the light burned brightly.

"Let's get some beer," Evgeni offered, rubbing his hands.

"I don't want," Salasov muttered. "Inna's already tired of waiting..."

"No, we're going to have beer. That's a must. Excuse me. I've gotten used to wetting my whistle with beer after work, and buying the evening newspaper. Don't try to talk me out of such a pleasure, Vitek. I dreamed about it in the army. To sit a while, drink some beer, and take a leisurely look at the evening news. How was work? I'll make a man out of you. It's a big step, going from the soil to a machine. If you're persistent enough, within a month you'll be working no worse than most."

"I'll master it. Let's go."

It was already growing dark; blue dusk was flooding the city. The street lamps went on. The boys went past Byelorussian Station and headed down Gorky Street. The ice-covered store and café signs shone dully; people were running, hurrying somewhere, cars were tearing along, squeaking on the icy asphalt.

Salasov quickly felt freezing and hurried along Evgeni barely keeping up with him.

"Let's get on a trolleybus, or else we'll freeze like the Germans outside Moscow," Evgeni proposed.

They jumped onto a trolleybus and were home in five minutes.

Inna was sitting in the armchair and reading a book. Ilya Savelievich was concocting something in the kitchen. The room was half dark, with only the floor lamp lit. Inna stood up to greet Salasov and rubbed his cheeks.

"You haven't frozen anywhere? Your nose is blue again. Well, what about work?" Inna asked after turning on the television and sitting down in the armchair. "Did you get set up? You'll get experience as an editor, and then we'll see what'll happen."

"Everything's fine!" Evgeni answered from the corridor. "He got set up! He needs a Moscow registration and a certificate from his place of study. So everything's just fine, sis. I know everyone there. Acquaintances and friends wherever you look. The words of the French king Louis XIV!"

"We know all about your kings," Inna said sarcastically.

The room was warm. Water was gurgling in the radiators. Salasov washed up and sat down next to Inna.

"Here, read these poems, they're very interesting," she proposed.

Salasov didn't feel either like reading or speaking. There was a buzzing in his head. It seemed that Inna would guess everything right away. He noted, as he had many times before, Inna's high forehead, her elongated and very regular nose, her lower lip, which protruded slightly, as though it were being pulled down. He looked at Inna and couldn't believe that this beautiful girl was his wife. Salasov promised himself on the spot to tell her everything, so that she would understand him. This was just the kind of work he needed. He was living in Moscow now, and in order to "keep his hand on life's pulse" as a poet, he should know the organism to which the pulse belonged.

Salasov took the book of Evtushenko's poems from Inna and began to read—softly, and then more loudly.

"How are the poems?" Inna asked and kissed him. "Well, how?"

"Not bad," he answered. "Not at all bad."

"I knew it. But Pulkherin hates such poems, he can't read them. He says they have neither thought nor music. A candidate of sciences and so stupid. He always amazed me."

"Yes, yes," Salasov answered.

The old woman entered the room and sat down on a chair next to them.

"My back's been hurting me all day." She touched Salasov's back. "Right here, my dear, next to the heart. I've already prayed and prayed, but it doesn't go away, it's ailing. I prayed for you too, for all of you, my dear. What a wonderful, strapping husband you have, Inna! I pray for you and I love you. He'll forgive you, God will."

"Thank you for that, grandma," Salasov said.

"I pray for you, poor things," the old woman said tearfully. "I don't hear anything, it seems. Not a peep. I only hear the bell ring. Why has God punished me? Why? But I pray for you."

"Pray for yourself, grandma, we're not believers," Inna said. "There's no need to pray for us. We'll get by somehow."

The old woman stood up and headed for the door.

Maria Afanasievna entered. She put a large, heavy bag in the corner, silently took off her coat, gave Inna, who had gone up to her, a smacking kiss on the cheek, and sat down on a chair. Salasov felt uncomfortable. Maria Afanasievna was silent, and her silence oppressed him. At supper she sighed loudly and heavily, and gave her daughter reproachful looks. Salasov was not himself, although Maria Afanasievna didn't talk to him and didn't even look at him. When they went to sleep in the old woman's room, Salasov no longer felt like telling Inna about his work. He felt as if Maria Afanasievna had spit in his face in front of everybody.

The following day was Saturday, and Salasov headed for the university to make arrangements to transfer to the evening department. He met Khmara at the university. He was wearing a suede jacket, with a mohair scarf hanging around his neck. He looked at Salasov sourly and smiled.

"How's life treating you, my married man? What's life like in Hymen's fetters? Are we quietly scraping by?"

"I'm already working."

"Well! They've harnessed you after all? A resourceful

family! To prevent that whole family from sponging off you, you have to sponge off them. It's the only way, but it's the cardinal way. They say you've been booted out of the university. They've thrown you out in the literal sense of that unpleasant word."

"How? When?" Salasov grew pale. "What are you saying?"

"They put up a notice. For systematic lack of attendance and for incompletes... Five others and you. So you're not in splendid isolation, Salasov. You're the fifth on the list from our class. Don't grieve, old man, it's not such a great misfortune. It's not the end of the world. Lobakov, that country bumpkin, that unfortunate cretin, has thought up a way out for you, but he didn't venture to tell me what it is exactly. Stop by and he'll tell you. After all, you're both country boys."

"Aren't you from the country too?" Salasov asked. "Why do you reproach everyone for being from the country?"

"It's a personal matter, old man. Our village was of an urban type."

"I see you're ashamed of your past life, life in your village."

"Well, go ahead and make somebody else be proud of it... Why, get off! That's not the point. Life is a wick. If the oil burns, the wick will burn too. In general, I like dialectics. Do you know that they caught a gudgeon in the ocean and it weighs a hundred and sixty kilograms?"

"Well?" Salasov was astonished.

"So, well," Khmara answered enigmatically and walked away from Salasov along the corridor.

Salasov heard music on the third floor of the dormitory. It was severe classical music, which he had heard on the radio. "Beethoven, probably," he thought. The door to the room was slightly ajar, and the music was coming from there. Salasov stopped, stood for a moment, and opened the door. A radio-phonograph was playing in the room, and Lobakov was lying on the bed and reading a book. When he heard the door creak, he instantly hid the book under his pillow and began looking at the ceiling, all eyes.

"I'm expecting guests," he explained. "I'm listening to music. Good music is food for the intellect."

"Why did you open the door?"

"Lord, let everybody hear it, Vitka. I was never an egoist. Should I begrudge them, or what?"

"And let them know you're listening to Beethoven?" Salasov asked. "You want the whole population of the dormitory to know it?"

"How did you find out it was Beethoven?" Lobakov was amazed and gave Salasov a suspicious sidelong glance.

"I've heard it before. I know you're not expecting anyone. Serious people listen to serious music."

"Let them know," Lobakov burst out laughing. "What's wrong with that? Nobody ever taught me music. I'm of peasant origin, and now I've bought myself records. I'm pleased myself. Thousands of my ancestors spent all their time digging in the earth—I don't see anything wrong with that—but now I'm listening to music and buying records. I'm educating myself. I go to public lectures. At our age it's a shame not to know anything about music. After all, these damn Muscovites studied piano from childhood, but I first saw one in the army. That's neither here nor there, but, old man, they've expelled you from the university. And the main thing is there's no point asking to be readmitted. I asked for you. I said you had a disease, that a crocodile at the zoo bit you in the leg, but they didn't want to listen. They turned a deaf ear."

Salasov began pacing about the room and shaking his head bitterly. Lobakov put on a warm coat and fur boots.

"It's good that you always seek the root of evil in yourself," he said in a moralizing tone. "All great people did the same. Only a fool seeks evil outside himself. Let's get on the subway and we'll be there in ten minutes. Shall we go?"

"Where?" Salasov dug in his heels. "I'm not going to ask to be taken back. I'm not about to humiliate myself, I fully deserved all I got. I enrolled, and now . . . It's just what a fool deserves."

"We're going somewhere, old man, but not where you think," Lobakov answered while walking out of the room. "You'll see that the game is worth the candle. I recently

met someone from my village, and he told me a thing or two."

They went through the deserted corridor and walked down to the ground floor.

"You'll see, old man, this is the last chance to get an education and not lose a year. How's your married life?"

"Fine." Salasov recalled Maria Afanasievna's silence and felt uncomfortable. Why did she dislike him, hate him so?

"Are poems getting written?" Lobakov asked. "Now, I've begun one piece. Quite a long one. The action takes place in Alaska. That's to heighten the plot."

"I'm not writing anything. I'm working at a factory. I'm thinking of writing a long poem."

"That's amazing!" Lobakov exclaimed. "A synthesis. The country plus the city. You couldn't think up anything more contemporary, old man. What's the main thing in life? Do you know what time the nightingale wakes up? At one o'clock in the morning! I've observed it myself. It wakes up and gets right to work—it sings. 'The early bird catches the worm'—that was my mother's favorite expression, and mother said that my father also loved that proverb. He was killed during the war. Trust in God, but don't slip up yourself, old man."

"That's true," Salasov agreed.

"You shouldn't count on suddenly writing a work of genius and getting famous, old man. Such things don't happen nowadays. That's Khmara's fundamental mistake. If he, a grown man, doesn't understand such simple things, he'll never write anything. You have to study what you want to write about thoroughly, light a flame within yourself, and illuminate what you want to write with that flame. Then write. We have more than enough patience, we hold onto life tenaciously. I'm telling you this. This is what Goethe said: 'Genius is patience'. Isn't it so? And that whistler Khmara imagines he's a genius. I stated my opinion to him, so he hasn't been talking to me for a week already."

"I don't know," Salasov answered. "It's probably so. I never gave it any thought. I always want to do what's best, but I often do myself harm. I was always afraid it

would be unpleasant for somebody, always afraid of making things bad for someone. I'm like my mother."

"I believe in you, old man," Lobakov smiled. "Honestly, I believe in you—and that's all."

They went into the subway. Salasov was pleased that Lobakov believed in him. He felt he was capable of something important, and decided he would end his studies and become an outstanding turner, and, in spite of everything, would write his poem, would write a large and deep work about something which had never been written about before.

In ten minutes they came to the pedagogical institute.

"Here?" Salasov was surprised.

"It's just what we need. It's the same as the university, the same department. Don't be afraid, old man. What are you afraid of? Forward, Sancho! Don't let difficulties destroy you!"

"I'm not afraid, but somehow I didn't want..."

"Now wait a minute, old man, we'll drop in at the Komsomol committee and find out everything. The committee is a colossal force here."

They walked through a low, half-lit lobby, went up the stairs, and saw an immense, light-flooded, semicircular hall with a glass roof, and framed with beautiful marble columns with stucco decorations on the capitals; it was light and quiet in the hall. It had three tiers with classrooms looking out on it.

"Isn't it beautiful?" Lobakov asked. "I myself am thinking of something, old man."

In the small room of the Komsomol committee there was a table piled high with papers, and a fellow was bent over the table.

"We'd like to see the secretary," Lobakov said loudly.

Without raising his head the fellow pointed to the door at the far end of the room. Lobakov opened the door, while Salasov remained standing near the door.

"I've come on a certain matter," Salasov heard Lobakov's voice. "Strictly speaking, my motives for coming are not of a personal nature."

"Not personal?" the secretary asked. "Then what are they exactly?"

"They expelled a fellow from the university."

"Well, so what? People are expelled from here pretty often, too. Besides, you have your own organs. What do we have to do with it? Is he a Muscovite?"

"No, he's a Siberian."

"It doesn't mean a thing that he's from Siberia. We have two groups from Siberia."

"But he served in the Soviet Army. He did outstanding service in the Soviet Army!"

"I should hope it wasn't in the American army," the secretary laughed at his joke. "We have a fair number of fellows from the Smolensk region who served in the army. They're good guys, but we're also dismissing a few of them. Your obedient servant also served in the army. I'm also from around Smolensk."

"And I'm also from Smolensk!" Lobakov said, overjoyed. "We're fellow countrymen! Our fellow countrymen are all over the place. My goodness, how happy I am. Where are you from? Lord, how good that we've met!"

"I'm from Yermakov. And you?"

"From Yermakov!" Lobakov shouted out and loudly slapped himself on the thigh. "Why, what's going on, what's happening?! Why, that's where I'm from! My aged mother, my kith and kin! Why, you know, that's exactly where I'm from. That's where I was born in the spring of 1941. Exactly a month before the fascists came. My Lord! How is it I don't know you? Where did you live there? We're the Lobakovs, who lived near the ruined church, the Sopronovs were on the other side."

"We're the Mushinovs."

"The Mushinovs?! How do you like that! Why, it happens you lived two huts away. That's great! How do you like that! But I don't remember you."

"And I don't remember you. I went away to study in a technical college in Moscow, and then I was in the army. It's been ten or twelve years."

"How are you getting on? I've been told that our Smolensk folks are everywhere. How's life?"

"I'm studying. I'm married. I have a child. I'll be graduating soon, and am preparing to enter graduate school. In general, I'll help you. I'll set up your unfortunate pal. But I don't promise anything."

"He's a good fellow, he writes poetry, by the way," Lobakov praised Salasov.

"This is something everybody does at one time or another," the secretary laughed. "Your obedient servant has also suffered from that disease. Choose any one of our boys you like—at the university or here—they all write. And they all turn out poems. Some do it in secret, others out in the open, but if he's studying in the philological department, then he writes and considers himself a poet. Especially the fellows. The girls have more modest expectations. A country boy does it because of the abrupt change in his surroundings. For a long time he can't understand anything. You can't ram anything into his head, he just writes—and that's all. Tell me: he hasn't been drinking?"

"No, what are you saying!" Lobakov was frightened. "It's for personal reasons. He fell for a Moscow girl and was done for."

"What, doesn't he get on with her parents? In my case we didn't get along well until I got a separate apartment. Oh, those relatives of mine, they're a good match for the Ageevs... Do you remember them?"

"Of course I remember them. What's your name?"

"Ilya."

"I'm Ivan. Has it been long since you were in Yermakov the last time?"

"No, about three years ago. I have very few relatives and acquaintances left there. There's nobody at all there my age. Industrialization, buddy, industrialization—it's an objective modern process. It sweeps out the village, and a new broom sweeps clean. But what places we have there! Yes... We have such beautiful places, you could paint pictures of them. And now I don't have any time to go there. My goal is graduate work. I'm preparing a little. So I'm in a whirl like a squirrel in a wheel. Ivan, I see you're dressed all right!"

"I work as a watchman in a printing house. I also hold a second office, as yard man. I earn a hundred rubles."

"You also rake in your stipend, it seems?"

"Yes, I rake it in, too," Lobakov agreed. "Why not take it if they give it to me? Take what's coming to you. I'm acting honestly, after all, I work day and night."

"You have integrity," the secretary laughed. "You probably don't write poetry?"

"I don't write poetry, but I do write prose. I've begun a substantial piece."

"He writes!" the secretary guffawed heartily, and Lobakov followed suit. "You write, after all! You haven't given it up?"

"No, I haven't. The action takes place in Alaska. To heighten the plot."

The secretary suddenly stopped laughing.

"I'll help, but only for the evening session, it's hard to arrange for day school."

"It's just what we need," Lobakov agreed. "He's a good fellow, or else I wouldn't have asked. A Siberian. I'll tell him."

"Drop by for some tea with jam," the secretary said. "Here's my telephone number."

"You even have a telephone?" Lobakov was amazed. "What a life you lead!"

"Drop by, Vanya. We'll remember a thing or two. And tell him to come straight to me."

"He's right here, outside the door. Should I send him to you?"

"All right."

Lobakov called Salasov. Some other fellow entered with Salasov. He was short and skinny, with a thin beard and a scanty tuft of hair on his large head. He gave everyone a firm handshake and uttered:

"The committee is as dirty as Kazan Station."

"Those are my verses," the secretary said. "My very own. I indulged myself, and I've already become a classic. Well, let's get acquainted." The secretary shook Salasov's hand. "Now I'll tell you..."

"I heard."

"You heard? Splendid! Your word acquires a social resonance. Splendid! It's splendid that you heard. When you come with your documents, drop in here. Don't lie to the dean, but make a clean breast of it. Say it the way it is. Thus and so. I have incompletes, say, don't think it's anything bad, and so on... Is that clear? He can see right through a man... Well, splendid. Is that clear? And so on..."

They went from the institute to the dormitory. Lobakov was pleased that everything had been decided positively.

"That's what fellow countrymen can do! I knew it. I was told about it. I'll probably transfer there eventually, too. Why shouldn't I enroll in graduate school?"

Salasov didn't stay long in the dormitory, he wanted to see Inna as quickly as possible. He got on the subway, went to the center, and found himself at the university. When he was already in the corridor, he realized that this was not at all where he wanted to be, and he was about to go back when he saw Lyuda.

"Hello, Vitya."

"Hi," Salasov said with assumed gaiety. "Excuse me. I was upset about my mama that time. How are things with you?"

"What about you?"

"Well, you know, I... Can it be that Vanya Lobakov didn't say anything to you? Or did he? You understand, I've been somewhat neglecting my studies... Can it be Vanya Lobakov hasn't said anything to you?"

Lyuda looked him straight in the eyes, and he had to avert his glance. "Why can't I tell her about everything straight out?" His head became empty, all his thoughts disappeared.

"Are you happy?" she asked. "Are you happy? Are you very happy? Have you found what you wanted in life? Yes?"

"I love her. Do you understand?" Salasov said, and headed for the exit.

He walked along Gorky Street and thought about the girl. And the longer he thought the less he understood himself. Why does she look at him like that? Why did she suddenly burst out crying and run out of the room that time in the dormitory? Why did she drop by to see him?

A blizzard was sweeping along the streets, and the cars hurrying by were raising a whirlwind of snow.

The old woman opened the door. She began smiling and stood for a while, watching the young fellow take off his raincoat.

"They have guests," she said in a whisper and waved her hand. "I'm praying for you. Oh dear, are you frozen?"

Inna, dressed in dark blue Japanese pants and a snow-white blouse, was sitting with her legs tucked under her on the sofa. The candidate had settled down on a chair opposite her.

"Ah, it's you," Inna said. "Come and sit next to me, my dread husband."

Salasov was embarrassed. For some time now he had disliked the candidate particularly, not admitting to himself that he was jealous of him and Inna, his heart even sank and his hands began to tremble unpleasantly when he saw him. He didn't like the candidate's fresh face or his impeccable suit and his blinding shirt, its cuffs, amber cufflinks lying on them like drops, showing from the sleeves—he didn't like anything about Pulkherin now.

The candidate stood up to greet him and gave him a firm handshake.

"We're discussing some scientific problems," he said evenly, as usual. "I came, but you weren't here. Were you taking care of business?"

Salasov kept silence, letting him understand that he had no intention of speaking. He sat down next to Inna and glanced gloomily at the candidate.

"Have a seat," Salasov offered.

"Thank you. How are you?"

"So-so," Salasov answered. "I dropped out of the university for the pedagogical institute."

"Well, so, that's not bad either," the candidate said imperturbably.

"What? Why did you drop out?" Inna rose. "What does that mean? What does it mean that you dropped out? What, are you serious?"

Inna lowered her legs to the floor and stood up. She wanted to say something, but she looked around at Pulkherin helplessly and asked:

"What, are you serious? Why did you drop out? First of all, I don't believe you. Don't joke like that! It's no joke, Viktor." She sat down on the sofa and began laughing. "Lord, at first I believed you... But he didn't drop out, he's joking."

"I'm not joking," Salasov said. "I'm serious."

"People also joke seriously," the candidate smiled. "I beg to inform you, gentlemen of the jury, that people joke seriously. Yes, sir, seriously."

Inna was still laughing. The candidate approached the window. Salasov decided that it really wasn't worth stating a hundred times that he had transferred to the pedagogical institute.

"Viktor, do you believe that meaningless poems can be good?" the candidate asked. "One poet has written: 'Listen, far, far away, on the Lake of Chad, there roams a refined giraffe.' It's nonsense, completely meaningless, but it's beautiful, musical... Many of Gumilev's poems make no sense, they're meaningless, but still they're beautiful. You sometimes happen to see a beautiful woman... Poems are also like that. Still and all, there does exist absolute beauty, abstracted from personal experience. Perfection. Eh? What do you think? I've been wracking my brains, searching for an answer. The ancient Greeks understood this. I'm sure they understood it in medieval Russia. If we take Rublev's icons..."

"What do you need this for?" Inna asked. "What for? Seek the absolute in chemistry. Chemistry is your domain. Go and look for it there."

"It's evidently time for me to go," the candidate was suddenly insulted, put on his coat, and, politely saying good-bye, left.

"Why does my mother like him?" Inna asked. "Tell me why, dear? Do you like him? He's searching for something, rushing about; he reads some kind of books, collects poetry and antiques, icons. What does he need it for? If I were in his place I would get my doctorate, but look what he's busy with. People like him are very unreliable and restless. They're so restless they become troublesome. I like faithful, dependable people like you, dear. You'll always be faithful to me. Always? Will you?"

Ilya Savelievich and Evgeni entered the room. Ilya Savelievich was glad to see Salasov.

"Here we are," he said. "Here we are in person. Inna, don't you hurt him. A good person in our chaotic times is quite a rarity."

Salasov was always embarrassed when Ilya Savelievich praised him.

"Why do you praise me," he was embarrassed.

"A-ah, the truth hurts? I tell you, it's very good when a man is shy. It's man's best quality. Just as strength is vodka's best quality, so the best thing in man is his conscience. Conscience is number one in man."

"Leave us alone with your conscience!" Inna said irritably. "He talks nonsense and thinks... He keeps on about one thing: conscience, conscience!"

"But I'll tell you, I'll tell you not about 'leave me alone' but in another sense. I'm a metal worker. I earn two hundred rubles, and I could get even more, because I'm respected at work. And I deserve it. So there. I let someone else earn a salary. I have a conscience, I don't want to. I give someone else a chance..."

Ilya Savelievich began pacing the floor, his wooden leg knocking, and spoke. He spoke, but Inna, buried in a book, stopped listening, she showed demonstratively that she wasn't listening, but Ilya Savelievich loved to express himself to the end, and therefore it didn't matter very much whether somebody was listening or not. He looked in the eyes of the one who was listening to him, and he often said to one what was intended for another. And now he addressed to Salasov what he intended for Inna.

"Why do I love Vitya? When he came, he lost his head right away. Conscience was written all over his face, because he had come to visit strangers. How will they regard him? What will they say? Evgeni doesn't have this quality. He thinks about how to make things good for himself, and not about what somebody might think. He's only interested in himself. So that's why I love Vitya."

"That's enough!" Inna lost her temper. "How tired I am of your nonsense. Don't you have anything to talk about? Then sit quietly. What are you talking about? Have you asked yourself? In our day nobody talks about such things. At least say something intelligent, or interesting. Well, say something! Evgeni, you consider yourself witty, you snigger at everybody... But look what you're talking about? It makes me sick to listen. How people used to talk before! Intelligently! Beautifully! A person could sit and feel

that he was a man in the real sense of the word. A man!"

"Man—it sounds so proud," Evgeni assented.

"That's exactly right," Inna continued. "If you read and compare it's hard to believe that life is becoming more petty. People are launching cosmonauts into outer space, tomorrow they'll fly to the moon, but what's happening in our soul? What about your soul, Evgeni? It's just an insignificant trifle, no more. Where is real love? We can discuss it! It's not so hard! Where is everything? Where?"

"In books," Evgeni answered. "That's what books are for. Therefore learning is light and ignorance is darkness. Flies also fly from the darkness into the bonfire's light, and what do they burn? Their wings. You also have to use your head when you fly. Sometimes darkness is also light. It's dialectics!"

"You always perceive the darkness in your head as light, Evgeni," Inna stood up and walked out.

When they were in the old woman's room, Inna said to Salasov:

"My name is so unattractive—Inna."

"I think your name is beautiful. Everything about you is very beautiful. I could gaze at your little finger for a hundred years. Or at how you read or do anything. You yourself don't know how beautiful..."

"Stop your nuances, Salasov. That's not the way to talk. You should say something that would make me feel good. But you're not saying the right thing. Shall we go to the movies."

They got dressed and went out.

On the way Inna was silent, thinking about something the whole time.

"Tell me, Salasov, can you read a whole book in one day?" she asked.

"I probably could. So what?"

"Nothing. That's the norm for some people—a book a day."

The trees swayed, dropping snow; people ran by, their coat collars raised. The wind, snow, and the fact that Inna was next to him made Salasov feel good.

"Do you sometimes feel that you don't know what you want?" Inna asked, sat down on a bench, and asked once

more: "Do you or don't you? I can't understand the kind of life I lead. Is it a good life or should it be different? Is it possible that this is the way it is with everybody—home, a husband, work, the movies, studying, and then dishes and clothes? Is it really possible that this is what love is for, that... Is this good? And if it's bad, and if you always believe this bad to be good, if you deceive yourself with total sincerity—what is this? I'm ridiculous, aren't I? Do you sometimes feel this way? Take an alcoholic, he drinks and drinks all the time, lives in a hole but he also believes his life is good."

"I don't know what to say. Why have such thoughts entered your head? Shall we go home?"

"I don't feel like. What's the meaning of your life, Salasov? I don't feel like going anywhere."

"Why not?"

"I don't know. It would be better if you didn't ask me about it. Tell me, do you love me?"

"Yes. Do you love me?"

"Don't ask me. I told you: don't ask me. Sometimes you're unbearable, Salasov. You go on with some flat joke and repeat it like a mechanical toy."

On the way home, and later, at work, Salasov kept thinking over what Inna had said, and he couldn't understand at all what she meant.

In the shop he asked Evgeni what he thought about the meaning of life, but he, getting the point at once, only waved his hand.

"Who can understand a woman? God created three evils in the world—the woman, the devil, and the goat. Everything else is accessible to us men. Don't think about it, Vitek. It's no use. In general, I should state my angle of vision, that is, my point of view. A wife should respect her husband, although in doing so she'd be following the impenetrable law of the cave man. Or why else get married? As a personality, she doesn't quite come up to man, but for her you should be everything. They say times have changed. But who says so? The man who treats his wife as the boss."

Pataev switched on the machine and began to turn a part.

He worked quickly and deliberately. Salasov observed his work and tried to do everything the same way. The deputy chief of the shop went past and then returned to Salasov. Vasili Vasilievich Sikorin was a short, dry man of about forty.

"The main thing when you work," he said slowly, "is not to hurry. Do what you like, but don't hurry. Don't rush to show that you're working fast. Speed will come by itself. Are you working according to the limb? That's right. But Pataev is working without a limb, he can determine the aperture's diameter to within a millimeter with his eye. Work with a stop," Sikorin continued. "Don't pay attention to the fact that Pataev isn't using a stop: he's showing off. Even veteran workers work with a stop. I remember that at the very beginning, Zhenya did much worse than you. I'll show you the basic elements of working with a cone. Repeat them in your mind, and then try them on the machine. Are you studying in the technical college?"

"No, I'm at the university. I've transferred now..."

"I can see you're a smart fellow. In what department?"

"The philological."

"A-ah! Tell me, do you like Blok? And Esenin? ... We're pleased that people like you are working in our shop. If you need anything, come straight to me. I like literate people. They're our support. But all the same the cutter should be held strictly at the center line. Remember: precision, accuracy, precision. And don't throw defective products into the trash can, as Zhenya does sometimes, imagining nobody knows... Ivan Alexandrovich Murygin!" Sikorin called loudly.

The foreman approached.

... When Sikorin was standing near Salasov, Evgeni worked without looking around once, without straightening his back, he worked well, accurately, knowing that the boss was standing alongside and watching him.

"What, Vanya?" he asked, wiping off the sweat. "Do you want me?"

"Go get pieces from the other shop. It's precision work."

"We'll manage," Evgeni mumbled and left with the foreman.

In half an hour he was standing over his tool and working

magic on the pieces, while the foreman was teaching Salasov how to work accurately and quickly.

"Look this way, and feel the distance with your fingers, so you won't mess up the part. Don't look at the limb, but squint and see. It happens that you've looked this way to help things along, and meanwhile you messed up a part over there. Well? Moderation, there must be moderation in all things. Well?"

"I see," Salasov answered.

The foreman left Salasov and approached Evgeni, took the part, sat himself on the box, and began to check it.

"It's defective, Zhenka, it's defective," he said and shook his head bitterly. "How can you be that way? It won't do. They cost five rubles apiece. You can see there's a very thin plate on the piece, its skin is thinner than a newborn babe's. Watch out, or our bonus will fly out the window. Watch out, Zhenka, keep your eyes open."

The foreman gave a moan and headed for the other end of the shop. Salasov approached Evgeni and silently stared at the defective part. The small hollow part with its soldered copper plate, very thin and very fragile, lay in the box. Salasov looked first at Evgeni and then at the part, and thought about what delicate work they entrusted to Evgeni.

"You see the defect?" Evgeni said. "Now you don't see it. It won't be my defective part." Evgeni took a thin drill, dug under the plate with it, and handed the part to Salasov. "You can't leave a defect on such an expensive piece, it won't do our shop much good. And now this defect is no longer ours. Let the neighboring shop get out of it. Let them not get a bonus."

"But it turns out that you..." Salasov was amazed, looking doubtfully at the part.

"Vitek, this piece costs five rubles. Five rubles is quite a bit, as you know. It's very unprofitable to make defective parts."

"But how can you do this?"

"Vitek, you think they don't do the same? Why, they sometimes lock up such a blister in the metal that you can't burrow it."

"What strange nonsense," Salasov shook his head;

"And besides, they're promising you your own seal of quality."

After work he and Evgeni sat in the dining room and drank beer. It was very cold outside, and the smoke-filled dining room was warm and stuffy. Looking at the workers, at their tired faces, Salasov thought for the first time that he, like they, was also tired, and this made him feel more self-confident, as if a new quality in him had been confirmed. He often went out of the shop after work; the wind would be blowing outside, the snowflakes could be heard falling, and he desperately wanted to ride off to a snowy field, sit in a sleigh, and look at the low sky, as far as his eyes could see.

The beer was cold and tasteless—it was apparently watered down. He didn't feel like drinking it.

"Drink," Evgeni kept repeating. "It's fermented, which is good for the organism. Do you know how strong your offspring will be? Drink!"

"I don't want to. I don't give a damn if it's fermented."

"Well, you're a fool. Don't look around, but drink. Are you still thinking about the pieces? Don't think about it. You didn't insult me. I don't get insulted. But if you play a dirty trick on me, I'll give you a double dose. When it comes to business I don't recognize family feelings. Relatives are also people, who have the bad luck to have common blood."

"That's not what I'm thinking about," Salasov said loudly and stood up. "What's the point of everything you've been saying? You know I don't like being sneaky, I don't see the reason. But I respect relatives. Even if they're the likes of some people!"

"Go ahead and shout," Pataev proposed calmly. "You shout and I'll listen. Teach me some sense, knock some brains into my head. You can't even handle Inna. I would have treated her so she would start spinning around me like a top. Who the devil needs your shame? If you want to know, I'll take off my pants right here and walk down the street just in my shorts. Only old ladies will get flustered, no more. But what is that to me! Let them get flustered. And nobody will say a word to me, but the likes of you will say something. They have to."

Inna wasn't home. Ilya Savelievich had prepared supper. After supper they sat by the television. Maria Afanasievna soon came from work.

"Who are they showing?" she asked, sitting by the television. "What actors are playing? Why, it's Yakovlev."

"It's not Yakovlev, it's Smoktunovsky," Evgeni said.

"I don't understand a thing about those damned actors," Ilya Savelievich laughed. "Honestly. Whether it's one or another, it's all the same to me, they're all alike. They're smeared with something. What's the need?"

"You should sit and not reveal your ignorance, at least," Maria Afanasievna reproached him. "You chatter on, but you should think whether it's becoming."

"I don't need actors. What the devil? What the devil are they to me, actors?"

"You're a coarse man," Maria Afanasievna said. "Callous."

"And you're so clever, Maria Afanasievna. A pure intellectual."

"Tradespeople have to be clever, Ilya. What did you think? You don't see people of our type in your dirty shop. You're ignorant."

"Fine, fine," Ilya Savelievich agreed goodnaturedly. "Where is our Innochka?"

"She went to the theater," Maria Afanasievna said. "She'll come soon. I bought her tickets for a Bach concert. Let her listen to an organ concert. Our poor daughter was so upset. I barely managed to get her a French blouse."

"Why didn't you say so right away?"

"Why, of course, now I'm going to start reporting to everybody! She's grown so thin lately from such a life. Oh, the younger generation! Pah, I've never seen anything like this in my whole life..."

Inna came home late. She took off her fur coat and boots, and sat down to watch television.

"Innochka, is it cold outside?" Maria Afanasievna was interested.

"I don't know, mama. I didn't notice. Why?"

"For no reason, dear."

Ilya Savelievich gave a dissatisfied snort and scowled at Inna. Evgeni spoke up first:

"Vitek, tell her that you're not such a fool to work for

a hundred rubles. Where do they earn such money at an editorial office? 'Show me such an abode, such a corner I never beheld . . . '

Salasov remembered that he had wanted to tell her about it recently, but she had prevented him, and now he decided: the time has come to make a clean breast of it.

"Yes, Inna. I wanted to tell you all about it before, but you didn't want to listen to me. Yes."

"Very interesting," Inna said in a whisper. "Very. It's downright entertaining. Mama, do you hear? How do you like that?"

"Didn't I tell you? Didn't I drum it into you a hundred times?"

"You talk about it so calmly, Salasov," Inna rose and, lingering and giving him a puzzled look, she sat down. "Listen, what are you doing? Where are you heading? Can it possibly be true? Is it possible? Everything was good when we got married, but now it's completely different. What, are you telling the truth? You're not deceiving me?"

"It's true . . . But I don't see anything wrong . . ."

X

Salasov slept alone that night, and dreamed about their conversation. In the morning he went to work without saying goodbye to Inna.

It was warm and noisy in the shop, the light burned brightly, and fine dust crunched in his teeth. Evgeni slapped everyone they met on the shoulder and said:

"Hi, friend!"

"Hi," they answered him. "How're things?"

"A friend is like an onion—he's all tears and fears," Evgeni laughed and shouted again: "Hi, Motya, where are you off to? Won't you take me along too?"

"We'll get along without you, somehow!" they answered.

Evgeni moved through the shop slowly, looking around for someone else to chat with, to exchange a few words, and smiled with satisfaction. At the distribution store a young girl gave them half-finished pieces and their orders.

"Did you go to bed early?" Evgeni asked her and gave Salasov a wink. "You didn't sleep alone today, did you? Oh, our sleep we can always miss, when we have a true friend to kiss."

"I did sleep! Get away! You're a fine one to be an inspector!"

"I'll soon be elected to the factory committee. I'll become top brass! I'm showing my interest ahead of time in the life of ordinary Soviet people."

"We've known all about people like you!"

"You'll see," Evgeni said seriously. "Just you wait."

He gave Salasov a meaningful wink. Some more turners approached. A crush began. Jokes came thick and fast. Each one tried to joke with the girl, and she kept up with them.

"How do you like that girl?" Evgeni asked, smiling. "She was at the registry office with me. She's a sweetie, although she's under age."

"That's who she is? Now everything's clear."

"Nothing is clear to you. Not a damned thing. I'll put my head in a noose if your answer is worth a goose. Listen, what do you think, do I have the makings of a great poet? Have you noticed that I express myself only in verse? You shouldn't joke with this girl."

"Then why do you joke?"

"I can't help myself, Vitek. She's a good gal, and she's beautiful, so I feel like joking. Sometimes you look around and one girl is prettily, another one is still better, and you don't know what to do. That's why I will never get married. I just joke. But what's wrong with that? That's what I am. Why, here's Murygate the profligate. Vanya, how do you do, cock-a-doodle-doo? Vanya, you have to preserve your honor beginning when you're young. How do you do?"

"Below the norm," the foreman answered. "The plan is in the fire again. Kosachev has already begun to turn the screws. He summoned us all at seven today, gave us a dressing down, and said that if we work badly, he'll get rid of all the foremen and do the work himself. So we're flying."

"High?" Evgeni laughed. "Do you need interceptors? Since when has the plan begun to fly like cosmonauts? Since when? Since what golden years?"

Salasov turned on his machine and asked the foreman:

"Vanya, will you let me go after dinner?"

"Where?"

"To the university."

"Tell me the truth!"

"But I'm telling you the truth."

"All right, go ahead. Only do the whole quota of the shift—and then go ahead. Only watch out that Kosachev doesn't notice. He's watching from above all the time now to see who is working and how; he has a plan of the shop in front of him, with circles showing who's working where. He'll notice if there's an empty place. So let Zhenka stand at your machine from time to time as if he's you. It'll look as if you're taking turns going to the bathroom. Are you willing, Zhenka?"

"As always. I can erect a scarecrow by his machine."

After dinner Salasov went to the university for his documents.

They gave them to him quickly. Salasov dashed out of the university and went to the pedagogical institute.

He dropped in at the dean's office of the philological department. He told the secretary that he had come to transfer from the university. The secretary showed him the next door.

"Go in to see the dean," she said, looked at Salasov, and straightened her hair.

It turned out that the dean already knew everything and didn't start questioning him.

"We'll accept you and we'll see. If you're going to study, then study to your heart's content. Finish your incompletes on time. If you don't, you know the consequences. Hand in your documents. Our curriculum is almost the same as the university's. Do you have any questions? If not, you may go . . . Wait a minute, wait a minute, there's one more thing! We're very strict about attendance! Very strict!"

Towards evening Salasov went to the chemistry institute; he wanted to meet Inna and talk to her about his work, about his transferring from the university, so that she wouldn't be angry with him. He should straighten everything out. He began waiting for Inna at the entrance. He walked back and forth, glancing at the passers-by: if ninety nine pass by, the hundredth would be Inna. But the hund-

redth was an old man who minced by, apparently a professor.

It grew completely dark, but Inna didn't appear. Salasov counted to a hundred twice, and only then did he decide to drop in. But they asked for a student card at the door: there was a party at the institute that evening.

He plodded home slowly, looking around, still expecting something. Evgeni called out to him.

"Vitek, soldier boy, what are you doing here in such freezing cold with the dew dripping from your nose?" he burst out laughing. "Are you waiting for her? She's home."

Salasov felt a weight fall off his back. Only now did he understand how he had been tormented by idle speculations.

"Listen, Vitek, do you want me to sell you a little idea?" Evgeni proposed. "Do you? You have to tear a few things out of your heart—and off you go!

"You are full of new ideas," Salasov answered listlessly.

"Vitek, life is utterly senseless. You can't just approach it any old way. Ostriches hide their head in the sand when they see enemies, but man shouldn't hide. If you don't believe it, ask a professor. Don't hold life against your heart, because it's not made of rubber—it's a mine which might explode. Understand it, get to the heart of it, defuse it, or else things will go badly. Well, all right. I have to trot off to a seminar. I'm tired of composing poems, but what can I do! Whenever I see you I fall into a poetic trance!"

Inna was making a draft. She bit her lips, erased something, did the drawing. Salasov sat in an armchair next to Ilya Savelievich and observed her silently. Inna was also silent. Maria Afanasievna was sitting in the corner near the floor lamp and knitting. Salasov felt her look at him reproachfully and sigh heavily.

"Inna, dear, did you finish?" Maria Afanasievna asked. "It's late already, dear, you'll ruin your eyes. We received Yugoslavian bathing suits. What about it?"

"Leave me alone," Inna brushed her off.

"Give Viktor something to eat," Ilya Savelievich grumbled.

Salasov started. Why, what did Ilya Savelievich say that for? He couldn't even think of food, he still couldn't calm down after his vain speculations at the institute. Only here,

looking at Inna, did he calm down. He had humiliated himself by not believing Inna, by standing and waiting: would she leave the institute alone or with Pulkherin?

"He's not a great lord. He can take his own food and eat it himself," Maria Afanasievna began speaking. Inna was silent. "Everything is in a pot in the kitchen. Times have changed, Ilya. You're an uncultivated man. How ignorant you are. And coarse! You only want the worst for your daughter."

"Why, what are you saying that for?" Salasov couldn't bear it and interceded for Ilya Savelievich. "What for? I simply don't know why you're talking that way, mama?"

"What do you mean why?" Maria Afanasievna was amazed, and stood up to get a better look at Salasov and to gesticulate better. "What do you mean why? Haven't we done enough for you? People pay an enormous sum just to get a Moscow registration. You should thank us, but, imagine, he's beginning to think we should serve him his food and drink! You have another thing coming, sweetheart. The era of slavery, when a wife wasn't considered human, has passed. That era has passed. Now a woman works more than any man."

"Shut up!" Ilya Savelievich spoke up. "Don't let me hear another word! She babbles whatever comes into her head."

Maria Afanasievna approached her husband and stated everything she thought of him: that he was an ignoramus, a boor, a windbag, a scoundrel . . .

Salasov headed for his room. The old woman was drinking tea, and gave him a seat at the table. After tea, Salasov paced the floor, waiting for Inna.

"You turn around, dear, so I can get ready for bed," the old woman asked. "It's time to go to sleep."

Salasov went out into the corridor and bumped into Inna. She was standing near the door and smoking. It was dark in the corridor, he didn't notice her, and almost knocked her down.

"Salasov, you'll put out my cigarette," she said.

Feeling Inna next to him, he completely lost his head, grabbed her by the shoulders and drew her close to him.

"Inna, I love you! Inna, I can't live without you. Well, why are you silent?"

"What am I supposed to say?"

"Say something. Well, you could at least say something to me. I love you, you know."

"So what, Salasov. Let me go. Have you gone crazy, kissing in the corridor?"

"You're my wife, Inna."

"Well, so what? Do we now have to kiss until we drop? Your poems came back today from *Yunost* and *Znamia*. Apparently they're really worthless."

"Inna, those aren't poems which I submitted. I'll write genuine poetry, but those were nothing special. Just naive, and nothing more."

"Ah, so that's how it is! Pushkin was famous at your age. Lermontov died at twenty seven. Can your poems really be so bad? That's why they returned them. To write well you need talent and nothing more. Now Pushkin..."

"But that was Pushkin!"

"You're right," Inna answered gloomily and left.

Salasov tried to find the reason why Inna had grown so cold towards him. It often seemed to him that she had become kinder, more affectionate, the way he wanted her to be. But days passed and Inna suddenly said:

"Salasov, I'm going to sleep at mama's today."

"Again at mama's?"

"Well, so what? She is my mother."

"But why is she so unfair to me?"

"Who? Mama! So that's how he talks! Look at him! You ought to be grateful to my mother for many things. At least for your registration... She went to so much trouble... What have you done for her? Nothing. Do you want us to quarrel? If you go ahead, I'm always ready. If you want we can quarrel right now. For ever."

"I'm not going to bow down to her, there's no reason," Salasov answered softly, fearing that the most insignificant word could serve as a pretext for a quarrel. "And then you talk as if you don't have any part in this. 'You, you, you...' But doesn't it concern you? You reason like your mother! Word for word!"

"You know, Salasov, we had better not quarrel. Or do you want to, all the same?"

He stopped speaking, not wishing to quarrel, and with-

drew into himself, endured in silence. Inna left. And it seemed to him that, all the same, he hadn't said what was most important. Thoughts entered his head, both good and bad. Only not the ones he needed. He was often angry at her, and began to think that she was at fault for everything, and at such times he was prepared to heap all the blame on her head, but then he suddenly remembered something, felt ashamed of his weakness, and with satisfaction, almost with exultation, Salasov accepted the blame and cursed himself for all he was worth. Then he began waiting again. He enjoyed waiting, especially since he knew ahead of time that no matter how long he might wait, she would come. He waited, observing himself closely, as if trying to detect every movement of his soul. "Aha! The door's slammed! It's her, it seems! No, she went past..."

May arrived, Salasov intended to drop in at the dormitory, but he just couldn't find the time. It was the examination period, the end of the month, and they had to pull themselves together at the factory and fulfill the monthly plan. Salasov asked for time off from work and went to the institute. There was a crowd of students near the lecture hall. He stood for a moment and waited, and then headed for the buffet to buy something to drink; he stood in line and right then someone called out to him.

An old sofa stood by the entrance door, and Lyuda was sitting on the sofa and looking at him. "How do you like that!" Salasov thought. "What is she doing here?" He wasn't at all glad to meet her, and never thought he would see her here. Lyuda was wearing a lilac-colored dress and a yellow knitted cardigan.

"Lyuda?" Salasov walked over to her with a glass of juice. "I can't believe my eyes. Is it you or isn't it?"

Lyuda didn't answer, but got up from the sofa and began walking about the lobby; Salasov followed her with the glass in his hand, with a stupid, pleased smile, and watched her tiny mincing steps ahead of him, her shoes clattering...

"What are you doing here?"

"What?"

"How are things over at the university?"

"All right," she answered, having stopped by the window.

"Why are you here, Lyuda?"

"Well, you see, I'm studying here," she answered, began biting her lip, and blushed.

"How's that? Why?" Salasov answered. "Now that's news! Just look at her! You were doing so well..."

Lyuda didn't say another word. She looked out the window persistently, and Salasov lost his head—it was so obvious that she was afraid to look at him.

"You know, I'm working as a turner, Lyuda."

Lyuda looked at him and asked softly:

"A turner?"

"I already received my second class rating a month ago. Do you know what place I hold among the young turners in the shop? You'll never guess. First! Why did you leave the university? Did anything happen?"

"No."

"Then why?"

"Just like that."

"But how? Things are never that simple."

Lyuda raised her eyes and looked at him, and said softly: "It's time for me to go." Salasov looked after her. Her stilettoes noisily clattered on the floor, and he shrugged his shoulders and remembered that it was time to return the glass. He began wandering along the corridor, thinking about Inna, that if Inna were like Lyuda, quiet, silent, then, apparently, their relations would be completely different.

He quickly passed the test, and this didn't surprise him—after all, he carried the psychology book around with him, and even read it at the machine. Salasov returned to the factory. He took a seat by the window of the shop buffet and bought four bottles of milk and two sandwiches. Workers hurried past. The young green poplars and birches could be seen from the window, and he began to feel sad. He seemed to have forgotten something important and tried to remember. And he remembered... the forests which stretched for many versts around Kuzovki. Sikorin approached and put a bottle of milk and a glass on the table.

"How did you, Viktor?" he asked, pouring himself some milk.

The deputy chief of the shop was wearing a new suit and tie—everything about him suggested neatness, freshness, cleanliness; even his overalls weren't bunched up in folds,

but lay flat, as if it had just been ironed; Sikorin wasn't wearing the same tie as yesterday, and the suit seemed new, apparently because of the tie. Salasov couldn't remember anyone in the village who dressed as impeccably and well as Sikorin. Even Pulkherin, who at the very beginning had struck Salasov with his suit and blindingly white shirt, couldn't be compared to Sikorin.

"I passed," Salasov answered, staring in shame at his four bottles: Sikorin had taken only one.

"Well, can you figure out blueprints now?" the deputy asked, and began taking small sips of milk. "Wouldn't you like to do some work in the technical bureau?"

"No, what are you saying, Vasili Vasilevich! You need to know something about design, and me? You know yourself that I'm a bust at that."

"Well, let's assume design ability is necessary, but only a minimum amount—what you learn in a technical college, well, even in school, if you like. You lack the integrity for that work. That quality is typical, it's true, of creative people. I can't even explain the reason. On a certain level I also consider myself creative, but everything in me is subordinate to reason. Do you write?"

"How do you know?"

"Viktor, I've been working at this factory for fifteen years. My father was killed—I've been working here even more than fifteen years. Does that tell you anything? How do you get along with your wife? Well?"

"Oh, so-so, more or less..." Salasov stumbled. "Of course well. Not everything goes smoothly, but we get along well of course. How else can it be between a husband and wife?"

"Do you live with your mother-in-law?" Sikorin asked. "But it's obvious that you do."

"Yes, we do, but she doesn't figure in. We're both adults."

"Viktor, have you thought of going to the factory committee—they have a housing commission—and trying to register? You won't get an apartment tomorrow. And you won't get one in a year, but you'll be registered. I got one after working for twelve years. The factory needs machine operators. Go to the factory committee. You never know!..."

"Why, Inna won't leave her mother for anything. I spoke

to her about it. What are you saying, Vasili Vasilievich! She won't hear of it. It's better not to talk about it."

"Don't forget that sometimes it's very tight in an apartment, but it's worse when there's a tightness in your breast, or when the two of you feel tight in a separate apartment. You have to seek an ideal, you have to strive for it, you have to pass through difficulties to reach it. I don't like high sounding words, but you must always strive for inner simplicity and beauty. I've been searching for an ideal all my life; I find one, but when I myself rise a step above it, I again begin the search. In the past it was simple. Strange as it may sound, when I worked here before studying at the institute my ideal was the shop chief Kosachev. It seems funny to me now, but at that time I imitated his way of sticking out his chest like a military man and talking loudly, of brushing non-existent sweat from his face. Man was born to work, so one should ennoble this labor, transform it into an ideal, and not just serve time, as many do. Therefore the work place and relations at work should bear the imprint of respect for labor. One must create a cult of labor. Now what was your childhood ideal?"

"What ideal! I grew up in the country, and you're working in the country by the time you learn to walk. A child tends geese at three, and when he's five he's taking care of the cow, weeding the kitchen garden, digging potatoes, gathering brushwood. Nobody from the country remembers ever being considered a child. Nobody. I was the only one who finished school, the others went through seven grades or less. My mother wanted that very much. We only had an elementary school in our village, I went to the neighboring village. Vasili Vasilievich you... how old were you when you got married?"

"Me? I'm not married."

"Not at all?"

"That's a strange question! Is it really possible to be half married? You know, this makes me laugh: I know ahead of time what you're going to ask me. Not only you. Sometimes it fills me with boredom. I'm not married. Don't look at me like that, I'm really not married."

"Why not?"

"You see, Viktor, there are many factors here, a mass of

circumstances. Matrimony is a young and joyous business. When you get old you have other joys and values. Everything is good in its own time. Why don't you finish your milk?"

"Why, you understand, I didn't think..."

"Drink, drink, Viktor. It's very good for you to drink a lot of milk now. Now that I'm thirty eight I have to control myself, or else, who knows, I might get fat. I don't feel like getting fat and carrying an extra load. For me the norm is the law. The main thing, Viktor, is to prepare oneself, get mobilized. Man should be mobile. In this sense everything, beginning with the junk in your tool chest, plays a role. In work and life you must summon yourself, just as an athlete summons his strength to run the distance. Summon yourself and take aim."

Sikorin headed for the shop. Salasov drank up the milk right from the bottle and ran to his machine. Evgeni was working. The shop, which usually fell silent during the second shift, was buzzing at the end of the month. In the corner of the shop, behind an enclosure of organic glass, a new machine constructed by the shop engineers under the supervision of Sikorin was being tested in the same place.

"You made it? Well, good for you!" the foreman said. "Carry on! Let's go, boys. The plan is in the thick of battle. We're losing. Nothing will come of it. Kosachev didn't notice you? You're in luck. I've got to run, get down to work. You'll be paid for piece work and some extra besides. The chief promised. I'm off."

Salasov had to bore an opening in a roller and cut threading. He didn't hurry. He laid everything out in order in the chest, moved the box with the article closer, familiarized himself with the operations on the operational chart which he had to perform on the parts, made sure he remembered their sequence and could work without glancing at the scheme every minute, and turned on the machine. Drills. cutters. punches lay close at hand. Evgeni approached.

"Did you pass?" he asked and lit a cigarette. "Oh, I am tired! You spin around like a squirrel in a wheel, but never get where you're aiming. Did you pass?"

"Yes, I did."

"Oh, the devil, how tired I am. My back aches, my head

is buzzing, and rubles are going up in smoke. It won't be long before I kick the bucket. But I fulfilled the plan."

Salasov nodded in answer. Evgeni looked at his work closely.

"Have your exams begun too?" Salasov asked, not tearing himself away from his work.

"First I have to pass all the tests. And the exams start at the beginning of June. I won't take my vacation. I'll go on sick leave."

"What, will you really get more on sick leave?"

"Sixty per cent for the sick leave and hundred per cent for the plan. It's profitable and convenient..."

"You'll find a way out of any situation."

Salasov worked for a long time. He finished only at eleven in the evening. He got washed and sat a while, watching Evgeni in the recreation room lose at chess to one of the fellows in the group.

"Great people always used to win," Salasov laughed.

"They had piles of free time for training," Evgeni answered.

In spite of the late hour, many people pushed onto the trolleybus. Salasov touched Evgeni and whispered to him:

"Stand up. Offer the old lady a seat."

"What for?" Evgeni asked in surprise, in a purposely loud voice. "I'm coming from work. I've tired myself out like a slave by incredible mental and physical labor, so that she might live well, and you want me to give up my seat to her besides!..."

They got off at Pushkin Square and headed home. They sat in the kitchen and spoke in a whisper so as not to wake anyone up, ate cold cabbage soup and cold baked potatoes, and drank tea. Ilya Savelievich came in.

"Look here, where's Inna?" he asked, alarmed. "I remember she was here at ten o'clock, but where has she gone? I thought she went somewhere with you. Something is happening to her. Vitya, you haven't hurt her feelings, by any chance?"

"Why, she's probably at grandma's," Salasov lost his head and rushed to the old woman's room.

The old woman, covered with a quilt in spite of the stuffiness in the room, was sleeping. Inna wasn't there.

Salasov ran out to the street, turned into the neighboring courtyard, and came out on the next street, glancing into all the courtyards, counting on seeing her sitting somewhere on a bench. He rushed down Gorky Street. Inna was sitting on a bench in the public garden on Strastnoi Boulevard, holding a sheet of paper torn from a pad in her hand, and laughing.

"What are you doing here? What's going on, Inna? You've found a fine time and place!"

"Just take a look," she showed him the paper. "Do you see that character who walked through the square? Do you see? He gave me his telephone number and asked me to call him up. I laughed right in his face, and he was insulted. He said that he had met me in the south. He was lying, of course. What crocodiles these men are! Is it possible that they're all like that? They only need one thing, everything leads to the bed, to that one thing."

On the way home, by the display window of the "News Chronicle", they met Ilya Savelievich.

"Inna, march right home!" he said furiously.

"And you, Vitya, halt."

Ilya Savelievich took Salasov by the arm. Inna walked on alone, her heels loudly tapping on the sidewalk. In her high-heeled shoes and narrow gray skirt she seemed very tall and shapely. A policeman was standing at the corner and yawning; passers-by were hurrying. The last trolley-buses were driving past; they were light inside and completely empty. Clouds hung over the hushed city humming within.

"Now, Vitya," Ilya Savelievich said in embarrassment, and scratched his cheek. "I don't like getting involved in other families' affairs. I don't butt in. Full autonomy, so to speak. But you have to be stricter with her, don't loosen the reins. Vitya, I love you like a son. I see that you're completely devoted to family life, you're not a light-headed kid, you're serious, and I want to help. I want to say one more thing: we would be happy to receive a letter, at least, from your mother. I want very much to have a look at her, so we would feel more closely related. We have to penetrate into one another's life here and there. That way things will be stronger. She's probably a kind person."

"Mother? She's very kind. You'd like her," Salasov said, and remembered that he hadn't written his mother yet about his marriage.

XI

Inna began living at the dacha in the middle of July. To get there one had to go to Petelino, about an hour by commuter train from Byelorussian Station. When Salasov knew that Maria Afanasievna wasn't with Inna, he went to the dacha after work. The train droned hoarsely in the fresh suburban air, dispersing its rattling roar all around. Salasov fell asleep in the car, tired after work and running around the stores for groceries. Inna met him on the platform. She was living alone at the dacha. They sat at night in the little wooden house, hungrily consumed canned goods, warmed somehow or other on a primus stove, walked on the wet grass, and through the wet, drowsy forest. They ate again. Salasov loved whole tomatoes and cucumbers.

"My goodness, eat vegetable salad," Inna told him. "Eat salad. It contains a mass of vitamins. A congress of vitamins."

"No," Salasov answered, "I love things whole, in their primordial state, even when cucumbers smell of the earth. No, I eat only whole ones. I don't know why, but I love it that way..."

While returning to Moscow, he slept again in the train; waking up, he looked sleepily out the window and saw people hurrying on the platforms, imagining how he would come to her again, and it seemed to him at that time that there could hardly be others as happy as they.

Once he arrived later than usual. Inna stood by the platform, with a tall thin fellow, shifting from foot to foot, alongside her. Salasov, waiting impatiently for the train to stop, caught sight of the fellow and grew gloomy. The fellow said his name was Valeri and stretched out his hand, but Salasov, upset, didn't notice his hand. The fellow, mumbling something in embarrassment, walked off.

"Just imagine what this Valeri is like," Inna said, hurrying along the path between the birches. "He ran a water pipe to our place. Now we don't have to go to the well for

water. He's so grown up and he's only sixteen. And he's intelligent. He's so young, but he has everything. Imagine, his father is a professor. Doctor of physics."

"That fellow doesn't interest me," Salasov said, and regretted it at once, because Inna looked at him closely and didn't say another word all evening. He told her about his work, but she was silent; he called her into the garden, but she lay down on the hammock which was hanging right on the veranda, and said that she would sleep alone. Salasov talked about Valeri, even praised him, but Inna remained silent all the same.

He got up early. He got dressed and was about to leave quietly.

"Salasov, mama is coming this evening," Inna said, and Salasov understood that his wife didn't want him to return there today.

On Monday Salasov again got ready to go to the dacha. He thought that everything would be fine. Evgeni was amazed at his haste, and spread his arms in surprise:

"Vitek, are you returning to penal servitude? Vitek, where has your heavenly love for my sister gotten you, where has this misfortune taken you? To that miserable dacha? Listen, we've had that dacha for about eight years already, and I've been there two or three times. Only Inna likes to be there in splendid isolation. To sleep five hours or less and then to break your neck flying to work—excuse me, your excellency."

"It would be better, of course, if the dacha were a little closer," Salasov justified himself.

"If grandmother had grandfather's talents," Evgeni laughed. "I've always asserted that marriage is the prime evil of our astonishing era. Personally, I'm getting married when I'm a hundred and fifty-five. And maybe even later. Everything depends on the forecasts."

At the end of August Inna left the dacha and moved to Moscow. Salasov took some time off. They moved the bedding and then came for the clothing, pots, and plates. While Salasov was taking the bedding, Inna gathered the raincoats, blouses, and stockings which were scattered all over the dacha. Finally they found and collected everything in the garden and shed, and could pause for breath.

"Well, Inna?" he asked. "Did you notice that the leaves are already turning yellow? 'Madame, the leaves are already falling...'"

Inna sat down on a stool in the middle of the courtyard. She was wearing bright yellow pants and a beige nylon blouse. She had grown noticeably thinner over the summer. Salasov sat down on the grass next to her. They sat silent for a long time and no longer hurried.

"What's the matter?" he asked. "Why have you stopped speaking? I'm sorry to be leaving here, I had such a good rest and felt so good."

Inna looked at him and smiled.

"I wonder whether this will make you happy or not," she said softly, and the corners of her lips turned up mockingly. "I couldn't think up anything better. I've gotten pregnant."

"You're going to have a child," he guessed at last. "Inna, why didn't you say anything? Why? So that's it. Mama will be so happy! How happy she'll be! What do you think? I have recently wrote her a letter, and I'll soon congratulate her with a grandson. So that's it! Well, Inna! It's great, eh? It's good, isn't it?"

"Don't shout, for God's sake," Inna said, looking sadly at Salasov. "How should I put it... I haven't graduated from the institute yet. I'm not so crazy about the idea of wallowing in swaddling clothes. I'm not as overjoyed as you. Well, why are you grinning? Why don't you understand me?" She began to cry. "Can't you understand that you and I are leading the miserable life of worthless plebeians? What's joyful about it? You should cry. There isn't even a hint of the intellectual in our life. My husband is a turner. Is it possible I turned down a candidate for a turner? The mere assurance that you love me is not enough. Am I ashamed? Yes! I'm truly ashamed to tell my girl friends that my husband is a turner and a model worker. I tell them that he's a poet and works on the magazine *Znamia*. I'm tired of lying and being evasive because of you. You're going to vegetate all your life and believe that everything is fine, but I don't need that, I personally don't need that."

Inna's words wounded him, and he stopped smiling. He looked into her eyes for a long time while she was talking. His wife sat before him, but for the first time in many

months Salasov felt that his wife was alien to him. "Alien," he thought bitterly. "Yes, yes, in all ways, without exception." He headed for the garden. It was quiet and light there, birds were singing in the forest, a thick, resinous aroma filled the air. The blue sky was especially pure and beautiful that day.

"Inna, you know, I love you so much," Salasov approached her. He didn't speak these words affectionately as usual, but gloomily and angrily. He demanded that she understand him. "Do you understand me? Or not? Is it really my fault that I love you? I really like my work. I've met people there the likes of whom you've never seen. If you would only see..."

The sun was setting. The top of the forest had turned pink. Looking at the forest, at the straw-colored sky, Salasov regretted for the first time that he wasn't at home in the village but here at the dacha, where such a cruel and painful reproach had been flung in his face.

Inna didn't speak to him any more that evening. On the train Salasov asked her:

"Inna, if it's a boy, what will we name him?"

"Oh, shut up!"

"Inna, I want to live a serious life!"

"Go ahead and live. Who's stopping you? Serious life! I'm sickened by your stupid questions. Sickened!"

They arrived at the apartment towards seven in the evening. Yellow leaves already lay here and there on the road. The city had grown quiet, had become calmer and grander and seemed more spacious; the thick smell of honey hung in all the public gardens and parks, and the trees stood sadly and solemnly. They arrived at Degtyarny Lane. People were selling apples on the corner. Salasov carried the suitcases into the apartment. Ilya Savelievich met them, gave Salasov a firm handshake, and said:

"Welcome, youngsters! Are you going to eat something?"

"No," Inna answered. "But Salasov will. Feed him well, so he'll stop tormenting me with his conversations."

"Why Salasov?" Ilya Savelievich was amazed. "He's your husband, this is a strange state of affairs."

In spite of the insult, Salasov walked around the room pleased, touched the sideboard and piano with his finger,

kept glancing at Inna, and couldn't conceal his joy. Ilya Savelievich noticed this:

"Vitya, why are you behaving as if a bee stung you in a certain place?"

Salasov's joy didn't even disappear when Inna announced that she was going to sleep at her mother's. He went to bed early. He lay for a long time, and couldn't fall asleep. He recalled his childhood. He recalled various terrible stories, of which there were many in the village—he remembered the time when a biplane landed in Kuzovki. The plane took off, then fell on a stack and caught fire; they had difficulty rescuing the pilots. Salasov imagined it so vividly that he decided to describe the airplane's landing, how people from their village rescued strangers, and how the peasant Medvedev received serious burns. He got up from bed and wrote everything down. He began by describing how a boy—his name was also Viktor—woke up because flies were buzzing over him.

Next day in the workshop Salasov thought about his dream, about how heartily he would have eaten everything he once ate at home in Siberia, and decided that as soon as the baby was born he and Inna would visit Kuzovki.

After work Salasov hurriedly said goodbye to the foreman and ran home. He was in luck. He ran to the trolleybus stop in time and was home in half an hour. Evgeni, who had gotten sick the day before, lay on the sofa bed in his undershorts, his legs crossed, and was reading Hemingway.

"Where's Inna?" Salasov asked.

"If my memory hasn't failed me, I haven't been hired in the capacity of a domestic detective," Evgeni answered, not tearing himself away from his book. "If you're very insistent, your grace, I can, of course, do you a favor for a small recompense."

"You've been home all day," Salasov lost his temper. "Why do you always play the fool when other people are upset!"

"Please leave me alone, Vitek. Before dinner Inna whispered with *unser Mutter* and then left in a direction unknown to me. She doesn't trust me, Vitek. Women! You know it yourself. Besides, I don't display any special feelings towards relatives. If you want to know, the more people live

in the city, the less they communicate. It's the law of alienation. Some classic said this, and I've deeply developed this rather interesting thought, and have taken it as the basis of my own behavior. It would be interesting to know what links hold family relations together. It's easier, of course, to live in a herd. I knew a girl who left her mother. It turned out that she wasn't her real mother. She had lived with the woman for a long time, until she was twenty, the woman had given her food and drink, but someone told her that the woman who had raised her wasn't her real mother—she had taken her from a children's home—and so the girl left her. That's how it is: it means that family is a purely conventional concept. What do you think, Vitek?"

"What's there to think about?" Salasov answered angrily, waiting for Inna. "All I know is that you're talking nonsense."

"Vitek, you don't understand me," Evgeni was astonished, still lying on the sofa and not tearing himself away from his book. "Do you get me? You don't understand me when I touch on some human aspects. Everything is simpler than you think. There's never any need to complicate things and events, everything is significantly simpler. There are no complicated things. For example, will you answer this question? Are you capable of sacrifice for the sake of lofty ideals? Is it a ticklish question? We all speak beautifully, but when it's a question of our own life, we think in different categories."

"You measure everything by yourself. You know what I'll say to you: it's enough to cede something of your own once or twice, something which makes you a man in your own eyes, for you to go to the dogs. And what will become of you once you've even stopped respecting yourself? What? What's point of living then? Who'll need your pitiful, disgusting life? If you disappear, nobody will even say a good word about you. So is it worth it? It's worth it, you idiot, it's worth it!"

"Oh, women!" Evgeni sighed sympathetically. "When I graduate from the institute I'll hang myself for sure. What will be the cause? Woman, of course. Women are the spawn of hell. But, the devil take me, I don't believe in either the devil or God. Isn't it odd? Then I won't have occasion to hang myself. I'll wait for better days."

Salasov took a book from the table, sat down in the arm-chair, and pretended he was reading.

Ilya Savelievich appeared soon and Maria Afanasievna arrived at about ten o'clock. When the door creaked, Salasov's hands began to tremble.

"Where's Inna?" Ilya Savelievich asked.

"Wait a minute, let me wash my hands," Maria Afanasievna said unwillingly, and unhurriedly took off her rain-coat and scarf and neatly hung them on the rack.

"Why don't you say anything?" Evgeni asked.

"Where's Inna?!" Ilya Savelievich shouted again.

"Don't shout, let me take off my things," Maria Afanasievna answered and, bending over, began to take off her shoes.

She did everything slowly, cautiously, as if she was thinking something over; when she had taken off her shoes, she went to wash her hands. She then began to rearrange something in the corridor.

"Inna went on a business trip," Maria Afanasievna said at last.

"What kind of trip?" Salasov asked and thought at once, "Why am I so upset? Calm down. There's no need to be upset."

"She was sent by the institute," Maria Afanasievna answered.

"But classes haven't begun yet!" Salasov exclaimed. "How can there be a trip? And then . . . then, she didn't say anything to me. And besides, she's not allowed. What's going on?"

"You are not allowed, but they know what's allowed at her institute and what isn't," Maria Afanasievna grumbled.

Salasov didn't know what to think. He was upset, but her mother spoke calmly, quietly, was not at all upset, as if nothing had happened. If her mother, who, in Inna's words, had devoted her whole life only to her, was not upset, then probably everything was all right. He wanted to believe that. Could they really send her on a trip when she was pregnant? He would go to the institute and let them have a piece of his mind. They didn't know how upset he was. There was nobody, probably nobody at all, who knew how he loved her! Perhaps Maria Afanasievna would understand him?

"You don't even know how much I love her!"

"It's obvious, Vitek, you don't have to talk about it," Evgeni said spitefully. "Love is written all over you."

"She can't feed on your love," Maria Afanasievna responded from the corridor. "You hurt her badly. Who can call that love? She's become so thin."

"Don't you dare speak that way!"

"I will dare!" Maria Afanasievna ranted. "I'm her mother, not you. Do you know that? Just look at him! What a bright falcon we've found..."

"Maria, you just keep quiet!" Ilya Savelievich shouted at her.

"Listen, mother, you really..." Evgeni shook his head. "Vitek, don't pay any attention to her. Old age is no fun."

"But what have I said? Do I really wish something bad for my baby? I only wish her well. What have I said? Why have you all ganged up on me? What have I done wrong? I only wish her well."

Salasov went to the old woman's, sat down near her, and began to tell her about Inna. He had to repeat things several times, and this gave him great pleasure. The old woman nodded to him:

"My precious son, I pray for everybody. Every day. Your father is a wonderful soul. The Lord will come and ask: 'O man, whosoever thou art that judgest: for wherein thou judgest another, thou condemnest thyself: for thou that judgest does the same thing. For the Father judgeth no man, but hath committed all judgement unto the Son: that all *men* should honour the Son, even as they honour the Father. He that honoureth not the Son honoureth not the Father who hath sent Him. Verily, verily, I say unto you, the hour is coming when the dead shall hear the voice and they that hear shall live.' Do you see how the Bible speaks? Maria will have to answer for a lot, my bright falcon. I'm speaking the truth. I used to know the whole Gospel by heart, but nowadays I forget, my memory isn't what it used to be."

The old woman whispered her evening prayers, while he thought, turning certain events over in his mind. At eleven o'clock in the evening, Salasov left the house and called up Pulkherin:

"You're not sleeping?" Salasov asked. "I wanted to have a talk with you."

"You've decided to have a talk . . . with me?" the candidate asked him astonished, and it seemed to Salasov that he was even at a loss. A pause followed, as if the candidate was conferring with someone, and Salasov even heard someone whisper. "You want to come today?"

"I can come right now."

"Do you know my address? This is so unexpected. But I'm always glad to see you."

"You're not a damned bit glad," Salasov thought maliciously. "You're lying, you're not glad!" Salasov hung up the receiver and ran to look for a taxi. In half an hour he was already standing at the right door. He pushed the doorbell and the candidate opened. He was dressed in a dark blue robe and slippers.

"Put on these scuffs," he said.

The long corridor, papered with light green wallpaper, smelled of perfume. A gray carpet stretched from the door along the wall, a telephone stood on a polished table, and red carnations were glowing in a crystal vase.

In the room to which the candidate led him there were three antique mahogany cabinets along the wall, with sketches of trees and birds on their frosted glass doors; by the window was a large antique table on lions' paws, piled with manuscripts and books. Books were lying on an ottoman and shelves, as well as on two armchairs.

"Please have a seat," he offered, and he himself sat down and stared questioningly at Salasov. "How can I be of service?"

The candidate now looked older than usual. His face was pale and tired, and his eyes glittered like those of a man who suffered from insomnia.

"Imagine, Viktor, I sat in my apartment all summer. Envyng those who went on vacation. I'm beating out my dissertation—once I took it up I can't abandon it. I've been unexpectedly working like a maniac—and I worked all summer, hardly ever leaving my apartment."

"Good," Salasov said softly, and coughed.

"You can talk loudly, my parents are at their dacha, so I'm here by myself."

"By yourself," Salasov repeated. He looked at the book shelves. How many books there were! Old ones, in leather

bindings with gold lettering, and new ones, apparently bought recently. So many books for one person! Did he really have occasion to read through all that wealth?

"Viktor, do you want some tea?"

"No," Salasov shook his head. "I only wanted to ask why Inna was sent on a business trip?"

He finally asked the question which he had come here to ask. Salasov tried to speak softly and calmly, but he felt that he couldn't keep it up for long. His throat began to tickle and a hot wave spread over his face. He felt stifled. He began calmly, but towards the end his voice trembled.

"On a trip?" the candidate asked, at a loss. "Inna Pataeva? On a trip? Are you referring to her?"

"Of course to her."

"Pardon me, my dear fellow, what trip?" The candidate didn't seem to understand anything. He even bent towards Viktor and moved his armchair closer to him.

Salasov was silent. When he was very upset he felt at a loss for words and, not knowing what to say, he looked unblinkingly at the candidate.

"What trip?" the candidate asked again, stood up, looked attentively at Salasov, and a certain movement, like a shadow, flashed across his face, as if something had dawned on him.

"Is it possible she wasn't sent?" Salasov asked in a muffled tone. "But Maria Afanasievna said . . ."

"When?"

"Recently. She said that to me just now, recently. In the presence of Evgeni and Ilya Savelievich."

"I don't know, I don't know, Viktor. As far as I know, they weren't intending to send anyone. Especially from among the students. Now, in September, when classes begin, in September, October—that's another matter. They'll send a few from the fifth year for practical work. Inna might be among them."

Salasov looked at the candidate's astonished face, and it seemed to him that he was lying; he interpreted the shadow which had flashed across his face as doubt, confusion, a reliable sign that he was hiding something. But what was he lying for? Why? Inna, after all, loved him, Salasov. He had no doubt, now, at least, that Inna loved him.

"Why are you lying to me?!" Salasov shouted. "Why do you lie and lie to me all the time?"

The candidate sat down on the table. His robe flew open, but he didn't notice.

"You're the first person who has ever levelled such an unfounded charge against me."

His face grew pale and became dryer, and a knot of muscles appeared on his cheek bones.

"How am I to blame? When did I lie? Tell me, I want to know. Tell me, I beg of you. Only don't shout. I trust that we, human beings, should understand one another. Remember: man is obliged to speak calmly. Hysterics are attractive only in Dostoyevsky's novels. Don't forget: we're people first of all. We think and speak."

"But..."

"Quiet!" the candidate continued calmly, but so impressively that Salasov started and looked around at the door. "Quiet! Man's voice is always calm, even when he's furious. Think it over and tell me: when did I lie?"

"Why, you went to the concert with her!" Salasov screamed and jumped up.

"Quiet!"

"You be quiet yourself! Why did you go? Explain it to me. If you went, that's already deception, a lie pure and simple!"

"I did go," the candidate answered just as calmly. "But you don't have to talk about it so excitedly, Viktor. I went, but do I deny it? I don't. It would be stupid. I would never deny when I'm to blame, even if I had committed a terrible crime. If you're capable of committing one, you should be able to answer for it. You don't know under what circumstances I went to the concert. Besides, as far as I can see right now, you don't know whether I went or not. You implied that my behavior was false? Granted. Maria Afanasievna called me up and said that you, Viktor and Inna, had gotten tickets for an organ concert—Grinberg was playing, it seems—at Chaikovsky Hall, but that you, Viktor, couldn't go, since you were busy, and you were asking me to go with Inna. I didn't have time then incidentally, but I went."

"That means you went," Salasov said.

"Furthermore, I don't see anything reprehensible in it. I look at these things somewhat differently. If you want to know, I was in love with Inna. But that still doesn't say anything. I knew that Inna had become infatuated with you. Just infatuated. I once talked to you about this. If you'd like to know, Viktor, I'm proud. I've sacrificed everything on the altar of my pride, even love. On the day when you came to the institute with Evgeni, that is, the day after your arrival from the army, I proposed to her."

"You?" Salasov exclaimed.

"At that time you didn't know each other yet. She told me she would think about it. Yes, Inna is quite a vivid woman. But the most vivid star (one must always draw parallels: it is sobering) is only a concentration of gas. Unfortunately. It was your misfortune, Viktor, that you couldn't recognize her for what she is. It's a shame that we can't have a spectral analysis of man. It's good, but it's also bad. It would be marvellous. Do you know that there's a splendid instrument, the Michaelson interferometer? But how would you know! It allows you to measure the diameter of stars. It's used in astrophysics. It wouldn't be bad to have something like this interferometer. One, two, three—and you could determine the possibilities of a man's behavior, the potential energy stored in him. Yes, man is a puzzle, which he himself tries to fathom as long as he lives. For me, Inna is one of the riddles."

"But how?" Salasov asked. "What should I do?"

"I don't give advice, Viktor. It's stupid. People don't follow advice. A child grows up, and he understands that the doves are paper and no more. And the little ships in the springtime are also paper."

"But what should I do?" Salasov asked, perplexed. He was convinced now that the candidate wasn't to blame for his misery. As soon as Salasov had entered the candidate's room and seen so many books, he thought at once that a man who had read so much couldn't be a scoundrel, couldn't behave unscrupulously. The more the candidate spoke the more his impression was confirmed. The candidate spoke sincerely, somewhat incomprehensibly, but Salasov was convinced of one thing after the candidate's long tirade: he wasn't concealing anything at all from him, since he had

nothing to conceal: he really was a completely honest person.

The candidate seemed to guess what Salasov was thinking about:

"Viktor, when I see sincere people I'm overjoyed, because conscience, accumulated through the ages, speaks in them. Sincerity is the heart's voice. Sincerity supports the world's conscience on its shoulders. You're a sincere person, Viktor."

"Why, what are you saying all that to me for?!" Salasov asked heatedly.

After his conversation with the candidate he felt neither like answering nor asking questions. Salasov was filled with a new feeling which put him in a calm, analytic mood. It seemed that Inna's actions weren't guided by love at all. Yes, there was clearly no love. After everything that had happened he couldn't assert now that Inna loved him. His whole life with Inna began to pass through Salasov's mind. It turned out that their relations weren't as he had pictured them. All the time Inna would first draw close and then pull away, like a will o' the wisp, but she had never been close.

"Tell me, Viktor, do you think Lermontov cried often?" the candidate asked.

"I never asked myself the question. Why, how should I know?"

The candidate paced back and forth and turned out the light.

"But a poet who said, 'Such emptiness, heartache, and no one to stretch out their hands...' couldn't have helped but cry from the terrible tragedy of this truth suddenly revealed to him! He couldn't have helped but cry. These lines alone presuppose a melancholy so deep that man might die of it. People have lived for so many years. They didn't know formerly that stars consist of gases, that in the end iron appears as the result of extremely complex chemical and physical transformations of atoms within the nucleus of stars. Then there's something else and something else again, and then man appears... They didn't know that there is degenerate subatomic matter. But now, read-

ing Lermontov, who didn't know all this—and I know it all—I begin to understand that, essentially, Lermontov knew more. And has anyone become more intelligent during the past millenium? He felt grief and pain, but he's eternal. We moved here three years ago. Believe it or not, but I don't know any of the neighbors on this landing. People live ten meters apart for three years and don't know each other. What is this?"

"It's late," Salasov began to get ready.

XII

Salasov headed home on foot. The streets were deserted. The thin, yellowish light of the street lamps made them look even more deserted; policemen walked sleepily at intersections and didn't pay any attention to him. Salasov came out on to Smolenskaya Square and plodded past the stone hulk of a tall building and along narrow, resonant Arbat Street. When the street ended, he turned left and, after walking through the boulevard and square, found himself in Degtyarny Lane.

The corridor was dark, but a light was burning in the kitchen. Ilya Savelievich was sitting at the table and dozing. When he heard the squeaking floor boards, he stood up and patted Salasov on the shoulder.

"Where have you been, Vitya? Don't think about it, everything will turn out all right. I was worried about you."

"Inna hasn't come?" Salasov asked in a muffled tone, sitting down on a stool.

Ilya Savelievich took a seat next to him and looked guiltily at Salasov.

"Vitya," he said, and his voice shook. "Vitya, don't you worry, everything will be fine, even excellent. It's clear that mother is really to blame. Judge for yourself. Well, it has to be admitted,—she doesn't like you, and that's all there is to it. She developed a dislike for you, the stinker, and that's all there is to it. She wants something special. When Inna was in school, I couldn't have been more happy. She graduated with a gold medal, and she was so intelligent—she would always prepare her lesson in time. And she was so quiet and modest that everyone was en-

vious. Her mother would sew her a somewhat better dress, but she would say: 'No, mama, give me a calico one, like everyone else's'. Well, when she started to grow up, we kept up with the others, Vitya. We paid for music lessons on that piano, which we didn't get for nothing either. She enrolled in the institute, and we were a hundred percent sure of her. But what happened there? I'm telling it like it is. I don't like to twist and turn. I always say what's on my mind; it's not becoming for me to act any other way. I'm a Communist. I feel very close to you, Vitya. There's no one closer to me. I love you like one of my own. Her mother planned for her to marry a scholar who would take her abroad to all the exhibitions, spread her fame would around the world. She hammered such ideas into her. That's the nail that's sitting in her head. A rusty nail. But I love you, Vitya. I'll get to the truth..."

"Thank you," Salasov answered. "You're like my own father. I never saw my father, he was killed before I was born, during the war."

Ilya Savelievich stood up and began walking around the kitchen, his metal heels clattering on the floor.

"She's my daughter, Vitya, that's what hurts. She's my own daughter. What does she care? She'll disgrace her own father. Maria set her on this path. Can such things really happen in a family? No, Vitya, they can't. From now on you should act the way they did in the old days. As they say, 'Love her like your soul, but shake her like a pear tree'. It's my fault. Now everything's done already. When I gave her a scare, Maria told me everything, but I won't tell you anything. I'm to blame for everything, there was too much I didn't see. My heart is so heavy. That's the way things are: 'Little children crush our knees, but when they grow up they crush our souls'. She won't make a wife, you see, and that's her first task on earth. You've got to be a husband and she—your wife, that's how it should be. Who has the upper hand is a secondary matter, but live as you should and continue the human race. But just see the way it's turning you here... But I'll make her answer for it, don't you worry, son."

Ilya Savelievich suddenly fell silent, waved his hand, and stamped out of the kitchen.

The roar of bath water could be heard. Salasov's thoughts became confused. First he thought of Kuzovki, of how fine it was there now, then of Inna, of her sudden mysterious trip, then Khmara and Lobakov suddenly came to mind. It was almost morning when he went to bed—it was already getting light. It was pleasant to lie down and think; he didn't feel at all like sleeping. He recalled the entire year he had spent in Moscow, and began to feel sad that the year hadn't passed as he wished. The first failure lay in waiting for him at the university, then with Inna, and then magazines and newspapers began to return his poems: "The author evidently has a feeling for poetry, for its living fabric; he knows how to find a precise rhyme and he avoids banality. His imagery may be considered successful... The poems could be printed, but because of the great quantity of material already accepted for publication, we cannot promise..." And so on. Salasov got up from bed and walked to the window.

Piles of clay and bricks towered in the factory yard: they were repairing the water pipe. The machine shop was working. Foreman Murygin was sitting at his working place and checking parts. He took a microscopic part in his fat fingers, turned it around in front of his nose, and then put it under a microscope and muttered:

"Hee-hee, ship-shape, it's baptized. Hee-hee, a baptized monster."

This meant that he didn't discover any defect.

"Hi, Vanya," Salasov said, approaching Murygin.

The foreman put the part aside and looked at Salasov.

"A naval greeting, Vitek! What gets you here so early?"

"The early bird catches... a well-buttered slice of bread."

"Do you want to earn some money? You're the first to come and the first to get a good article. I respect folks like you. You support production—I'll let you earn a good living. I won't begrudge it. In September we'll make you the fourth class rating. Vasili Vasilievich is pressing me on your account. The main thing is production, Vitek. Where is your second home? At the factory. Wait, I'll draw up the order,"

Salasov sat down on the box with the articles. It was the end of the month. The director of the factory appeared in the shop, accompanied by the shop chief.

"It's crowded here," the shop chief said, "It's very crowded. There aren't enough workers. I wrote you a note."

Murygin brought the order and the operation chart. Salasov tested the machine and laid out the articles close at hand. The machine worked smoothly with a slight, monotonous hissing; only by putting his hand on its body could he feel it trembling. When preparing to leave work the day before, Salasov had wiped the machine with a rag and greased it. Salasov looked around his working place, picked up an old rag which somebody had dropped; he did everything slowly, as if he were afraid that an abrupt movement would scare off the thought which should appear in his head. What was he waiting for? He didn't make any decisions, didn't hurry. And he tried not to think about his wife at all. He knew everything, it seems. He understood everything. But why, why did she decide to get rid of the child? No, he didn't want to admit to himself that he thought so ill of her. He didn't have the right to think ill of her.

The article was oiled, and smoke extended from under the cutter. Salasov couldn't mount the support for feeding the cutter to the necessary depth. He looked at the cutter and saw Inna.

Trying to ward off this hallucination, he began repeating: "Roller with an opening, roller with an opening... Roller with an opening, roller with an opening!"

Evgeni appeared and knocked his key along the back stock—he always did this before beginning work.

"Hello!" he shouted joyously in English, touching Salasov's shoulder. "Cheap! Profitable! Convenient! You'll have success, a dacha, and money left over! Hazel hens in wine sauce and plump anchovies. How do you like it? Is it poetry?!"

"Don't shout."

"I'm talking, I'm not shouting, but if you like, I'll be silent," Evgeni said, laughing. "Today I'm speaking only in verse. You know the song: 'I'm always chasing rainbows...' I have a variation, listen: 'I'm always chasing

money, let fools run after rainbows.' How do you like it?"

"Is that all?" Salasov asked angrily.

"Isn't it enough?!" Evgeni exclaimed. "I can do more. You're so demanding! What day is today? Payday! I take it you've got yourself a fat job. It's a bad thing to get ahead of certain beasts of burden. Where did you disappear yesterday? I looked for you."

"I was at Kirill Nikolayevich's."

"At Pulkherin's?" Evgeni was amazed. "Well? How's Inka?"

"But why should she be there? Why? What, do you think..."

"I was convinced, Vitek. I lay my head on the block; I'll give my head for tarpaulin boot soles and my tongue for shoe laces that she's in his luxurious quarters. Her mother so incited her... not against me, of course... that she had to vanish in an unknown direction, unknown even to Sherlock Holmes. I'm treading on the throat of my own song!"

"Go ahead and tread, don't chatter," Salasov said and took up his work.

Salasov didn't even go to dinner, but stood, bent over, and not thinking about anything, worked quickly, constantly increasing the machine's velocity trying in this way to distract himself from thoughts of Inna, from yesterday's conversation with Ilya Savelievich. Just once Vasili Vasilievich came up to him and asked:

"How are things at the university?"

Salasov stopped the machine and wiped his forehead.

"I transferred to the pedagogical institute a long time ago."

"Excellent, Viktor. You can work in our technical college. The head of technical studies, Ivan Filippovich Kondakov, is retiring in a year. Keep it in mind. Decide. If you can manage the work, go yourself and say you're studying at the pedagogical institute. We need people like you."

Sikorin went about his business, and Salasov took up his work. In the evening Salasov handed in his articles to the foreman, changed his clothes, and headed for the exit; Evgeni silently followed him. Such silence was unusual for him.

"Why are you silent?" Salasov was surprised.

"I'm thinking about myself."

"About yourself?"

"What do you think, about you? It's your business to think of yourself. Shall we drop into the canteen? We'll down a beer. I often think, Vitek, about who and what we are? Here we run around, you, in particular... We go through a lot, nurse our grief, but who needs it except us? It seems to me that life is only what's inside me. If I didn't exist, there would be no life, although it continues, objectively speaking. It exists, but what good is it to me?"

They dropped into the canteen. The workers crowded near the buffet. They were drinking beer at the tables. The beer in the heavy, sweating mugs was cold and amber.

A fellow in a motorcycle helmet got up from a neighboring table, approached a girl, said something in a whisper, and took her by the arm.

"Please join us!" he declared loudly.

The girl didn't answer and, freeing her arm, moved to the other side of the table. The fellow followed her and repeated loudly with a smile:

"Please join us. I don't have to coax a young and pretty girl like you, do I?"

"I won't go," the girl answered.

The fellow grabbed her by the shoulder and turned her sharply around towards him.

"I'm not going to coax you!"

"Go away! I don't know you and don't want to know you," the girl answered, trying to tear away.

"What does he want from her?" Salasov asked.

"He knows what he wants, Vitek, and she knows perfectly well what he wants. They all know everything," Evgeni said. "It's shame they have no *vobla*. Vitek, don't go over there, keep your seat." Pataev pulled Salasov by the sleeve. "It's none of our business, it hasn't matured yet. Don't go over there, I'm telling you. It's their business. They're taking care of their own business, so let's not butt in."

But Salasov was no longer listening to Evgeni—he approached the fellow who was holding the girl by the arm,

The fellow was short, with a thin, very small, childish face; he was about sixteen.

"Stop it," Salasov said to him and flung his hand off the girl's shoulder. "Stop it, I'm telling you."

"And who are you?" the fellow was amazed, and folded his arms on his chest.

His friend approached and, also folding his arms on his chest, stared at Salasov. The one in the helmet took the girl by the arm once more and pulled her towards him.

"I think I told you," Salasov fired off in anger and pulled away the fellow's hand.

"Who is this firebird?" the second fellow asked, and grabbed Salasov by the arm tenaciously and firmly, which Salasov didn't expect from such a puny kid.

A third fellow approached and grabbed Salasov by the shoulders. Salasov jerked. They held him tightly. "Evgeni, come on, throw him off," Salasov turned to Pataev. The latter was standing and finishing a mug of beer.

Salasov rushed, tore his arm loose, grabbed a stool, but then something heavy hit him on the head. Things grew dark and swam in front of him, but he kept on his feet. He dashed once more towards the stool, which he had dropped. But the fellows suddenly poured out of the canteen in a crowd—the voluntary people's patrol had entered.

Evgeni was waiting for him on the street. The fellows had vanished into thin air.

"Never start trouble," Pataev said didactically, "if you see there are more of them than us."

"Oh, you're a real scoundrel!" Salasov said in disgust.

"But Vitek," Evgeni began calmly, as if nothing had happened. "What do I have to do with it? Well, tell me! After all, I'm not your bodyguard. I did everything I could. There were eight of them and two of us. If I had thrown myself into that fight, let's say—although I avoid all brawls—it would have been just like adding fat to the fire. And fat burns. Besides, I saw one of them had a knife. I went out. They didn't touch me, but they knew I went out. There's a psychological effect here. They knew, for example, that they couldn't kill you while I was outside. A witness! I could call the police at any moment.

The voluntary patrol went by and I told them: 'There's a fight in the canteen'. That rescued you. And what they could have done to us—oho! There are dialectics at work here."

Salasov was so indignant he couldn't say a word; it was unpleasant for him to see Pataev. Noticing that a trolley-bus had stopped, he ran up and jumped on the step.

XIII

She was sitting on the sofa bed, her feet tucked under her, and reading a book. As before, she was wearing blue stretch pants, a white blouse with long length-wise flounces on the wide sleeves, and a heavy knitted cardigan thrown over it. She hadn't changed at all—Salasov noticed this at once. She didn't even glance at him, as though nothing had happened.

"Well?" she said, continuing to read. "Hi."

"Inna," he said, and approached her. Her face was pale, and carefully powdered lilac-colored circles could be seen under her eyes.

"What do you want?" she glanced at him. "Don't stand, please, sit down."

"Where were you?" Salasov asked. "You know, I almost went out of my mind."

Inna stood up.

"Please sit for a minute, I'll go and wash my hands," she said and hurriedly went out.

Salasov decided to tell her everything: how he had waited for her, how upset and worried he was. She should understand him. He began pacing the room, trying to choose the right words, upset, but he could not find the words and understood that he would not find them, that it was absolutely useless to think about it. It was hardly worth the trouble to rack his brains looking for the words and in general to speak, since all words would be out of place.

Inna slipped into the room, sat down on the sofa, and, just as before, tucked her feet under her.

"Inna," he began, trying to speak calmly, "Inna, I wanted to tell you..."

Evgeni entered, put a plate of borsch on the table, and began to eat.

"Evgeni, go away," said Inna softly.

"Don't prevent me from taking in nourishment, my dear, and I won't be in the way."

"I told you to go away!" she shouted, and Salasov understood that Inna was no less upset than he. Evgeni spit and went out. "Go on," she said. "Speak. I'm listening to you."

"I don't want to speak," Salasov continued. "I don't want to speak, but to live seriously. I want us to be serious in all ways—in our relations and in all our actions. Let's assume you went away on a trip. Let's assume it. But couldn't you have told me ahead of time? I'm your husband!" Salasov spoke more and more decisively.

Inna was silent and looked at him, squinting up her eyes.

"We didn't get married so you could go to the theater or to a concert with Kirill Nikolayevich without even telling your husband. You deceived Kirill Nikolayevich, you asked him in my name. That's unscrupulous, to say the least. And more than once, afterwards, on the following day, you announced, that you had been at the theater. It's shameful! Both for you and for me. Let's live seriously. I don't want and don't expect anything from you that's beyond your strength."

"Excuse me, I'll be right back." She went out again.

"What was I talking about?" Salasov asked himself. "I don't know. Inna is intelligent, literate, even the candidate had emphasized this. So why doesn't she do what she should? There's evidently something here which I can't or don't want to understand. What's the sense of her behaving this way?"

Inna returned, took off the cardigan, and threw it on the sofa.

"Perhaps you'll sit down all the same?" she asked nervously and sat down. "There's a chair over there."

Salasov sat down.

"Well?"

"There's only one thing I want—seriousness," Salasov said. "Inna, you should understand..."

"You already talked about seriousness," Inna interrupted. "The ballad of serious relations. One poet wrote a ballad about a goat, and now there's a ballad about seriousness. You talked about that. What else did you want to talk about? You see, my dear, I understand you, but do you understand me? That's the question. I understood you even without your words, without your outpourings."

Everything he had said really did seem stupid now, but, after all, these stupid, incoherent words still expressed what he wanted! So could it really be that this was all he wanted? What had become of the words they had used to express themselves before their marriage? Was he merely asking for something? Asking for, pleading for, demanding seriousness? That's the way it was formerly, when Karenin demanded proper behavior from his wife—that she exercise a bit more propriety with her lovers, but how could he say then that he wanted to live seriously, to have children by her?

"Inna, I want seriousness in our relations," he continued. "I can't imagine another life for myself. If I love you it should be serious, if I do something—it should also be serious; I can love a person only seriously! I don't want to laugh at anyone, no matter what, or to giggle, or to shout."

"Well then, speak calmly," Inna said. "You're repeating someone else's words, by the way. Pulkherin spoke the same uninspired rubbish when he tried to make me love him."

"Inna," Salasov shouted, "Inna, I'm thinking about you! We will finally have a child. I'm thinking about it, and you can't prevent me from thinking about it!"

"You can stop thinking," Inna spoke evenly. "You can stop thinking. There won't be a child."

"Why do you think so? How am I to understand you?"

She was silent a moment and then continued softly:

"Nobody was involved. I wanted to myself, and I got rid of it myself . . . Nobody's to blame. Please, don't blame anybody. I didn't want to have a child. Nobody, nobody has the right to make me do what I don't want. Do you hear, Salasov? Nobody! And, please, don't look at me that way, and don't squint up your eyes. For God's sake! I

don't want to wallow in swaddling clothes. Do you understand? Save me from that. I don't want to turn into some kind of family work horse. No thank you! Spare me! We didn't choose the right time. But you would like it! You wanted me to become a model wife! But only the milkmaids at the Exhibition of Economic Achievements are models. Such a life is not for me. I'll go to graduate school. And you wanted—seriousness! Let other women transform diapers into crimson sails and blow them as hard as they can, to sail along the quiet swamp of family life—and then trumpet to the whole world about their happiness and well-being. Tomorrow a hydrogen bomb will hit me on the head, and I'm supposed to calmly fondle a child? No, I'd rather think up something else."

"But I even wrote mama about the child, to make her happy," Salasov said in anguish. "And this is what it's come to... But how were you up to it?! How could you! Tell me? Were you forced to get married or did you decide on your own? How will I be able to look at you after this? Who made you put on this yoke? Who? Do you think you can live without obligations?"

"Tomorrow I'm leaving for Saratov for practical training," she began calmly and then burst out: "You won't have to look at me! I'm going for six months..."

Salasov ran out of the room and stood for a while in the corridor. He had to be alone and think everything over. In the kitchen Evgeni was still eating his borsch. The old woman was standing in the corner of her room and praying to a large icon of the Kazan Virgin; from the blackened icon a mother, a woman, tender and kind and still very young, was looking, her head bent to the side, and holding an infant with an unchildlike, serious face in both her arms. She was holding her son. Pride, an almost sad joy about what had happened, could be felt in her glance.

She was sitting on the sofa and ... crying. Salasov was amazed. He hadn't prepared himself for anything in particular, but he didn't at all expect her to cry.

"Inna, what is it?" he asked softly, cautiously, amazed at his own voice. It sounded strange. And it seemed as if it wasn't he talking. "What is it, Inna? Is it possible you didn't love me at all, and what you said has no meaning?"

Tell me, is it possible that you never really loved me?"

"I don't know, I don't know anything," she sobbed and looked in the book, and tears fell on its pages. "I haven't understood anything lately. It seemed to me that you took away from me... took something away from me. I became more and more furious with you, and at times I couldn't see you without irritation. We're incompatible. I don't know why it happened. Maybe it's because you didn't become what I wanted, what I deluded myself with, that is, a poet. You left the university. I thought you were doing this to spite me. You began working as a turner. That was the last straw. I lost the main thing—hope. I don't know, something happened... And it seemed to me that the child wasn't mine, but only yours. Therefore I was glad to get an abortion, I was supported and strengthened in my belief by... It doesn't matter whom. You understand, Salasov, this probably isn't love. It's... I don't know what. I haven't sorted everything out yet. I was deceived, I'm sure of that, but I can't resign myself to it. You love me. But that alone is no basis for happiness. I myself should love. Understand that!"

"Inna!" Salasov shouted. His lips began to tremble. He hurriedly turned away to the window and got his handkerchief. "Why did you lie and deceive me, why? Why this masquerade? You insulted me, but why did you do it? It may be that nobody else will ever love you as much, and you'll always repent that you insulted me, your husband."

"It's not true. I didn't insult you," Inna said and, putting down the book, she turned away.

Salasov hurried to the dormitory. But none of the boys were there. Where could he go? Salasov recalled that the foreman Murygin had invited him, and he went to his place.

It was stifling in the bus, packed with people going home from work. A man standing behind him breathed on the top of his head and droned in a drunken voice:

"Now, you're a cultured person, right? I can see you're cultured. Then tell me, why did the Spartacus team lose?"

Who did they lose to! You're cultured, right? Then why did Spartacus lose?"

Salasov didn't listen. He sank into a reverie, thinking of his conversation with Inna. Now his words didn't seem as weighty and convincing. Salasov even forgot he was riding in a bus, didn't notice that people were pushing him and even shouting for him to move aside and let someone pass, he looked at himself as if from the outside: now he was coming home and the old woman Marfa was saying that Inna had arrived. And he didn't know what to do.

... Murygin was at home. All the windows in his apartment on the first floor of a five-story house were wide open; he himself was sitting on the floor and making his son a whirligig. A very young woman, whom Salasov took for the foreman's daughter, opened the door. She turned out to be his wife.

"Why, Vitek, can it be you?" the foreman was amazed, getting up from the floor and wiping his hands on his T-shirt. "That's why I was hiccuping! I was sitting and hiccuping. And my wife said to me: 'You should be ashamed!' And I said I wasn't doing it on purpose, and that someone was coming to see us. This is what it meant. Well, it's really great! This is my wife Katya. And this is our hero. Our son. My mother-in-law is at work. That's our whole family. Put the teapot on to boil, Katya. And bring us a little vodka. Katya, my wife, doesn't like it when you praise her."

In an hour, after they each had some vodka and drunk a cup of tea, Salasov, who was left alone in the kitchen with the foreman, said:

"Something has happened, Vanya."

"What's happened?"

"Well, it's my wife..."

"You've quarreled," the foreman finished his thought for him. "How shall I say it. It's good you came to me. Very good. I can judge if it's anything. But is it serious? Or..."

"It's serious, I think," Salasov sighed heavily.

"Well-I..." The foreman stood up. "It's good you came to me. You should always be drawn to people, Vitek. I'm always drawn to them. People don't really care that much of each other. But I consider myself a better person and

value myself more when I don't do good only for myself. I'll do good without any self interest. How wonderful that is. Vitek, I consider it the greatest human kindness and happiness in the whole wide world. Now I'll suggest what you should do, Vitek. It's good that you came to me. I'll always come to your aid. Katya!" he shouted. "Make a bed for Vitek and me in the small room!"

"On the floor?"

"Yes, on the floor. You know why we'll sleep on the floor. It's such hot weather."

They were soon lying on the floor, and the foreman said:

"Now I'll give you such good advice, such good advice . . . If her character were like my Katya's: I would pity her and that's the end of it. But I'll give you advice, I have experience in this field. Murygin knows women! When the thought occurs to me, I'll make a suggestion that will totally solve any problem at once."

The foreman fell asleep without making any suggestions. Salasov lay there and tried not to think of anything, but sleep didn't come all the same. The thought that Inna was waiting for him kept whirling through his head. Salasov woke Murygin up.

"I'm going, Vanya."

"Why, what do you mean?" the foreman was amazed. "Why, I'll give you advice that will solve everything at once. Just wait a little. Morning is wiser than evening."

Salasov got dressed and headed for the street. The foreman accompanied him, and they waited a long time for a taxi.

"If anything happens, come to me immediately," the foreman said on parting. "I like you, Vitek. The lives of good people are always messed up. It seems to me you and she are in a bad way. I'm sorry for you."

XIV

Salasov arrived at the shop so early that none of the workers were there yet. At seven o'clock the bulky figure of Murygin in wrinkled blue overalls loomed in the aisle between the machines.

"Did you get home all right?" he asked with interest. "Do you have classes at the institute?"

"Uhuh," Salasov answered.

Evgeni appeared a little later.

"Hi!" he said cheerfully. "How many years are you planning to live? Where were you yesterday?"

"Why?" Salasov was on his guard.

"Oh, for no reason in particular. She left for practical training work. She asked for it herself, as far as I know. She didn't leave any message for you, Vitek. Just whispered with mother a while, cried a little, and took off."

"What did she cry about?"

"The usual thing. I don't think it was about you. You know about trips. In Russia it's the custom to cry before a trip. It goes back to Rurik's time. I'll lay down my head on a block and give it for the soles of simple tarpaulin boots that it began long ago. You had a falling out with her yesterday? I heard everything. Father is taking it hard. He doesn't sleep at night, just sits and smokes. You were wrong to take it so seriously. You have to speak sarcastically to her, to show that you're above her. That way you'll rule your sweetie with an iron rod. That's the only iron rod. Or if you can't strike her, then pretend that you don't reject that well-tried, much abused Russian method of maintaining family order which you know so well. You know, there's an anecdote, 'The three commandments of a married man'. You don't know it?.. Too bad... Folk wisdom never did anyone any harm. All medicines are good, but the old ones are the best. Don't forget, Vitek."

"I don't want it that way, Evgeni. I want everything to be honest."

"Well, my dear, there are plenty of things you want! I, for one, also want many things. I love work for example, but with a strange love. I love it, but I don't feel like standing amidst the grinding, roaring, and dust. But I love this work more than any other. And my reason cannot overcome it. It's pleasant when they don't shout 'Zhenka' at you, but call you 'Evgeni Ilich'. And you know what will happen if we dance to your tune? No matter how long a man and wife live together, their tie is purely conventional. They were strangers before and they'll re-

main strangers. If you don't want to die at the age of Romeo and Juliet, don't be nervous and don't demand a lot. That's the way it is, Vitek. In general ours is the age of cybernetics, the age of thought and the devaluation of feelings."

"Get away from me with your idle chatter!" Salasov got angry. "How did you get all that stuff in your head? Go tell that to Vanya—he'll have a good laugh. He loves his wife. Isn't it so, Vanya?"

"Vanya may be foreman, but he's a regular drip. You found a fine example."

"Don't listen to him," Murygin shook his head. "He's only chattering, but he himself does just the opposite. After all, Zhenka, we're all humans. And what were we all created for? But now people are ashamed of goodness. To be ashamed of goodness you have to be a parasite! Beasts or whatever—they're only beasts, but, people are human beings, after all, Vitya. No matter how much you twist and turn, you're still human. You may not want to be, but you're human all the same. And if that's the case, you have to fulfill your obligation. You have to pay attention to them, open your eyes and ears, see and hear and understand."

"To flash across the horizon like a burning comet?" Pataev smiled. "There is a rational kernel in that. But you can burn up that way, and burn up before your time..." Evgeni continued his line of reasoning. "When you stream across the sky like a comet, you're pursuing purely egoistic goals, since you're creating glory for yourself and not thinking of others, but if you don't stream across the sky like a comet, then you're also doing this for purely egoistic motives, since you're living only for yourself."

...After work Salasov attended a lecture on 19th century literature, given by a young woman instructor. She glanced at Salasov from time to time, but he wasn't listening to her but thinking that he was already living in Moscow for over a year and had gotten to know many people in that time, and he went over all his acquaintances in his mind. What different people they were! But he had been wrong about one person—the one who was closest to him. A year had passed after the army, but he remained

essentially a naive kid from the country, and if he took a look at himself or looked around, then he wouldn't notice anything new, everything would be the same as a year ago. Was it possible that nothing had changed? "And the factory?" Salasov asked himself. "And the fact that I'll soon pass to the fourth class rating? And my experience? After all, I've felt more in this one year than in all the twenty two years of my life. Is it possible that none of that has had any effect? None at all? No, it couldn't be. Well, no, it seems I'm no longer so very naive and stupid." And Salasov felt something grow tense in his breast, that here and now he wanted to do something important, real, so that everyone could see who he was and what he was capable of. He began writing a story in his notebook. He wrote about the village once more . . .

Once, gathering his courage, Salasov sent his first story off to the magazine *Country Youth*. He waited a long time for an answer. He decided eventually that they had either forgotten about his story or lost it. And he grew cold towards the story which he had liked so much before, deciding it was bad, if nobody on the magazine paid any attention to it. He stopped waiting for an answer and began writing again. He worked at the machine, hurried to the institute after work and wrote stories at lectures; at home he sat over the stories until morning, and in the morning he hurried to work. He could no longer think of anything but his stories. Subjects flooded his brain, and he wrote, trying to pour his feelings and thoughts onto paper. Often when he was sitting on the trolleybus and reading a novel, he suddenly wanted desperately to write. He got his notebook and got off the trolleybus.

Once Salasov was slowly ambling home from work. Near the Mayakovskaya subway stop he was offered tickets to an organ concert. He had never listened to organ music, which he connected in his mind with the church—he knew this from books—and began to refuse, but someone shoved a ticket into his hands and demanded a ruble. Salasov looked in amazement at the girl who was offering him the ticket so persistently and shrugged his shoulders.

It was noisy in the concert hall; there were many people there. Then the concert began. His heart contracted, and

his spine tingled. He looked around and didn't understand anything... From then on Salasov decided not to miss a single organ concert. Once he brought the foreman and his wife to a concert. Murygin listened for a long time, snorted heavily, scratched his head, and finally pleaded:

"Vitek, really, either I'm a fool or... I don't understand a thing! Do you call that music? I love the accordion!"

Salasov tried not to catch Maria Afanasievna's eye, but once she met him in the corridor and said:

"It's time for you to look for a room, Salasov."

"I don't live with you, Maria Afanasievna," Salasov answered gloomily, turned away, and promised himself never to begin talking with her again.

He went to the university dormitory during the November holidays. Lobakov was lying on his bed in the room. He was overjoyed to see Salasov.

"Where's Khmara?" Salasov asked. "For some reason I haven't encountered his brilliant doggerel in major publications. He hasn't taken to drink?"

"First of all, Khmara has gotten married, old-timer, and he's already divorced. He was awarded a room in court and received Moscow registration. Khmara doesn't miss a trick. He doesn't mind at all doing somebody a bad turn, changing her fate, and then leaving her. She loved him. She came here and cried, but what can I do? He did it consciously. She's pregnant and wants to have the child. To remember him by. Yes, old-timer. Secondly, he's not Khmara, but Khmarovsky! A poet! It's beautiful, he said. Besides, Khmarovsky sounds good—like Mayakovsky. How are you?"

"So so..." Salasov answered.

"You're a big lout," Lobakov said thoughtfully. "But if misfortune has come, open the gates. It never rains but it pours. Tell me, don't you know why Lyuda transferred to the pedagogical institute? You don't know? You should be lashed with a whip. She loves you, you boobie! And you turn up your nose. You went for that spoiled fashion-

plate. She'd come first in one fur coat, then in another. But what's in her soul? . . . Didn't you see?"

"Don't you insult her!" Salasov was indignant.

"I'm not insulting her. She needs some loafer of a musician," Lobakov continued. "And who are you? A worker! A peasant inside. Lyuda is a real person. She's an exception. I wouldn't take one look at you, you jerk, but she . . . Somebody should spin out a work about her which would make people sigh. She was here recently."

"Go ahead and write it," Salasov suggested calmly. "Create it, Vanya."

"I've given up that stuff, old-timer. I'm writing criticism now. I'm better at it. I'll apply for graduate school in the field of criticism. I'm no writer. It's not enough to want it, you have to be one. I understood myself. I love analysis. I'm not an artist, but an analyst."

"But your judgements on how to write were so correct," Salasov was amazed, got up from the chair, and walked to the window.

"Correct judgement don't make a writer. It has to be in your nature to write. Of course, with a certain amount of effort you can learn, the way you learned to work at the machine, but it's not the same thing. I don't want to be a plebeian in art. So the main thing is to understand yourself. That may be the most important thing for fellows of our age. You have to plow deeply. I realized at once that you're an artist. I'm writing an article now about the meaning of nature in man's life. Roughly speaking, we can't even imagine now how sorry we'll be eventually about the disappearing flora and fauna. Then we'll start crying. About shrubs and nightingales and green meadows. We'll start crying in a hundred years. We'll fly off, let's say, to Venus and, remembering all of this, we'll weep because we didn't preserve nature. Go ahead and write about man's longing for nature, his craving for it. Are you drawn to the village? You are. And so am I. But what is that if not the call of nature? Write about how a certain professor, distinguished and well-known, lived in honor and renown until a ripe old age, and then he turned up by chance—as if by chance!—in his birth place and wept, remembering his childhood, and asked to be buried in the

abandoned village instead of Novodevichy Convent, in an overgrown graveyard smelling of weeds, where his ancestors lay. Write! Half of Russia will weep and understand you."

"I loved her, Ivan..."

"You couldn't have loved her!" Lobakov said confidently and began to get ready. "Accompany me to the printing office. I'm on duty today."

"Do you want me to lend you some money?" Salasov asked.

"What for?" Lobakov was surprised. "I never borrowed money in my whole life, and I never will. I'd rather starve than go into debt. What for?"

"I earn a lot, almost two hundred rubles a month; the chairman of our collective farm didn't earn as much."

"Why, that's terrific. Go ahead and send some to your mother. After all, you're always in debt to her."

Salasov proposed that they have dinner in a restaurant—to celebrate the anniversary of the October Revolution,—but Lobakov would only agree to a café, explaining that he despised restaurants.

When they were saying goodbye at the printing office, Lobakov asked:

"What is your concept of infinity, old-timer?"

"Mine?" Salasov was surprised. "The same as everybody's. Infinity is infinite."

"You see, old man, I recently went to a lecture, 'Einstein's Theory of Relativity and Infinity' and didn't understand a thing. The lecturer spoke, but I couldn't understand what he was saying. It was incomprehensible to me. Everything has an end. The ocean is deep, but it has a bottom. A road might be long, but it has an end. In man's understanding everything is linked with an end. And here—bang, there's no end. It's incomprehensible. Everything has a beginning and an end. Absolutely everything."

"How do you know?" Salasov asked. "It's simply hard for us to imagine. We think in such paltry magnitudes, our minds can't grasp the scales of the cosmos."

"You're contradicting yourself!" Lobakov exclaimed. "You are! If the mind can't grasp the cosmos, it means it's

incomprehensible to the finite mind. The boundaries here are disproportionate. The immense magnitude of the cosmos and the magnitude of human potential, immense, but not as immense as the cosmos. There's difference in principle. Just as you can't fit a bin in a pea, the cosmos won't fit in our mind. You might be able to fit our galaxy, but it's apparently impossible to fit the whole cosmos."

"But if you pour a mountain of peas, then you can cover your bin with them," Salasov laughed.

"It turns out that if people from other planets and we undertake it together, we'll manage."

"You're talking about an end again!" Salasov said.

"No, there's an end nevertheless. Everything everywhere comes to an end, and here there isn't one. Such things don't happen, old man."

Salasov didn't hurry home. He walked slowly along Lomonosov Prospect, stood by the subway station, looked at the people, and tried to define who they were. After his conversation with Lobakov, after they had sat so pleasantly and cozily in the café and stood by the printing office, and Lobakov discussed infinity seriously and so logically, in a manner untypical of him, Salasov began to feel good. He began to think about how Lobakov had changed. A year is essentially such a paltry unit of time, if, of course, you compare it with a century, for example, or a millenium. Lobakov had changed! This was an unexpected discovery for Salasov. He slapped his forehead. For the first time a man had changed before his eyes—he himself had noticed it; that wasn't the same fellow, who had pondered on rubles and clothes, but a thinking man with eternity before him, for whom reasoning and thought itself had become what a good suit, tapered shoes, or a fine shirt was for many. For Lobakov reasoning had become a habit.

...It was already dusk, a cover of reddish clouds hung low, and Salasov looked first at the clouds, then at the speeding automobiles and dimmed street lamps; the sound of the cars grew thicker, people disappeared from view, but Salasov didn't even notice the small snowflakes beginning to whirl in the air. That was why nature had grown silent! And that was why Salasov seemed to emerge from

himself; his total consciousness, his thoughts and feelings contracted, and the impulses which he lived by already radiated from him, from within. He recalled the first snow of last year and Inna's words that it was the true and first witness of their love. Yes, this time the snow was a witness to the fact that they did not meet it together. . .

Weeks and months passed. . . Winter was coming to an end. Salasov was amazed at how quickly time passed. He hadn't had a chance to look around when Inna arrived. Evgeni told him about it. Evgeni had also changed; he liked the role of accomplice and diligently informed Salasov about everything. He dropped in on him often, observed how he read or wrote or simply prepared for seminars.

"Inna has come back," Evgeni informed him in the shop on March 10, smiling and shaking his hand. "The grande dame paid us a call in person."

"Did she say anything?"

Evgeni was silent and looked Salasov in the eye.

"Well!" Salasov shouted impatiently.

"No, Vitek, she didn't let out a peep about you. What did she say about you? She was more silent than a gravestone, which wilts from being all alone."

Murygin ran in and whispered:

"A spot check is on. Watch out, boys. They're checking chests and refuse bins."

The husky, powerful shop chief Kosachev, deputy shop chief Sikorin, senior foreman of the technical inspection department Kluyev, and shop party secretary Suvorov hurried about the shop. When they approached a refuse bin, the shop chief nodded and Kluyev turned the refuse bin over and opened the chest; if defective parts fell out of the bin, he wrote down the name of the turner and the group foreman. The turn came for the bin near Salasov's machine. No defective parts had turned up in Evgeni's bin. But parts poured out of Salasov's bin. One, two, three!..

"Your name?" the shop chief asked sternly.

"I didn't have any defective parts!" Salasov lost his head.

"Your name?!" the shop chief asked even more sternly.

"Salasov."

"But, Comrade Sikorin, this is the very man you praised so highly," the shop chief smiled in malicious delight. "He didn't even manage to get rid of the defective parts."

"They're not mine," Salasov spread his arms and began to feel uncomfortable most of all before Vasili Vasilievich. "Honestly, they're not! I don't know why they turned up in my bin. My article is completely different. Look, here's my assignment, here are my orders, my operation chart. Look! You see, it's a totally different article. I'm turning openings in a sprayer; this isn't mine, it's a relay. How did they get in my bin? Here are my parts." Salasov moved the box with finished parts towards Sikorin. "Here are mine, here they are. . ."

"You did them yesterday," Kosachev smiled. "Yesterday, pal, yesterday. A defective part is money down the drain. Money is state goods."

"I was doing the same thing yesterday. Ask Vanya. Ask Ivan Alexandrovich, Vasili Vasilievich."

"That's so," Murygin said. "Everything he said is true. You should ask Pataev. He was working on the reverse relay. Zhenka, it seems that you were performing operations on the reverse relay? You should have your face bashed in for what you did. Are you the one?"

"Why not confess," Evgeni answered. "I'm the one. I don't deny it. You asked and I answered at once. Salasov had no part in it. It's my article."

"You passed defective parts off on a friend?" the shop chief asked and shook his head. "What goings on! In war-time it would have cost both their lives. He would have been placed before a tribunal, but now see how calmly he talks."

"I didn't pass it off," Pataev said. "They're not defective parts. I was running around and dropped them. Or, rather, I put them there. Accidentally. They're not defective parts."

"What do you mean, not defective?" Kosachev was amazed, looking around at Sikorin. "What do you mean not defective? Make a list of the rejects immediately. Where's the inspector? Make a list immediately! Where's the inspector? Kluyev! Make a list!"

"They're not defective parts," Evgeni repeated. "I did it accidentally. Just see how much I've done. Look. I'm making an effort so our shop will be no worse than the others. Otherwise, you know, they taunt us all the time: 'The twenty-third! The twenty-third shop!' I fulfilled the plan two hundred per cent. Towards evening I thought of fulfilling it three hundred per cent—and without any defective parts."

"All right, write down their names, and we'll look into it," the shop chief said and moved on. "Three hundred per cent. Good man! If he does three hundred per cent and only three little parts... Well, all right. The main thing is that he supports the shop."

"What did you do that for?" Salasov asked Pataev when the bosses had left.

"I observe an interesting phenomenon in human nature. In general man is an extremely curious piggie. He was created quite strangely by the Almighty. You have to intimidate someone or win him over for him to respect you. Two opposing things fulfill the function of a whip here—fear and flattery are the engines of the modern world. Man is a strange creature. All his steps, his actions are logical, but at the same time, if regarded from the opposite pole, they're irrational. And each view is right. I've decided that everything is true. Nothing is false. And everything, Vitek, is good in the moonlight. Dialectics is a great thing. It's good that you met Inna, but it's also bad. The meeting taught you a lot, you're an old hand now, you won't be left holding the bag. In a word, every cloud has a silver lining. Oh, I should become a philosopher! What do you think? Here I've lost my sense of values and I seek it with a flame in the daytime. Where is it? They say that Diogenes went around in the daytime with a lantern, and when they asked him what he was doing, he answered: 'I'm seeking a man'."

After dinner Salasov obtained permission to go home. It was March. The snow was melting under the weak, but warm sun. Water drops were flying from the roofs into the porous, spongy snow.

Marfa, a coat and scarf flung over her shoulders, was sitting by the window and looking out on the courtyard. She felt like going outside, but was afraid of the air, still chilly and damp; the old woman was dreaming of something and quietly smiling.

"Is it warm outside?" she asked when Salasov entered.

"Yes. It's very warm. Spring has come, grandma!"

Salasov nodded and lay down on the bed. He was waiting for Inna. He wanted finally to have it out with her, so that she'd understand that he had no intention of living like this. But he didn't manage to have a talk with his wife that day. Only a week later did Salasov, who had come home earlier than usual, meet her in the corridor. Puddles were already flooding the streets, and children were floating boats on them. Inna was wearing her Japanese synthetic fur coat, her face was pale, but she had become even more imperturbable, more serious, her expression more harsh. It seemed to Salasov that she gave a start when he opened the door on hearing her footsteps and looked at her.

"Inna?" Salasov came out to meet her.

"I wanted to inform you," she said softly, then stopped; her voice did not tremble and she spoke softly but decisively, as though she had seen Salasov only yesterday—she had apparently prepared ahead of time for such a meeting. "Please tell my father not to pester me with nonsense about you. I beg of you."

"But Inna!" Salasov was completely at a loss: everything about her—her voice, her intonation—everything was unfamiliar. "Inna! We're not strangers..."

"Who can tell," she said in the same voice. "I think we're not all that close. I thought you had left. Excuse me, I don't have the time."

She slammed the door and disappeared. Salasov was stunned. He hadn't expected anything good to come of their meeting, he even guessed that she was avoiding him—Evgeni had talked about that—but he didn't expect such a conversation, such an unfamiliar intonation in her voice. Then what did he want from her?

Salasov tried to meet her again, but she avoided him. They both were waiting for something.

He saw Inna again accidentally. He was standing on the street and looking at the Rossiya Cinema, where a stream of people was gathering for a new film. It was dusty and hot. A stocky man of about thirty-five was walking alongside Inna, holding her by the arm and talking animatedly. The happiness of his whole appearance struck Salasov; his delight in walking alongside Inna and holding her arm could be felt in everything, even in his swarthy face and black hair.

"What can I talk to her about?" he asked himself loudly and headed for the subway, not yet understanding where he intended to go and why, whether in general it was worth it. Then he unexpectedly understood a simple thought, already clear to him, which rose vividly in his consciousness like a hard, almost tangible pivot which penetrated his whole brain: "She's left me and moreover, she's happy with another man, but nevertheless I didn't fully understand it." And getting on the subway, he shook his head, trying to grasp, understand something, tracing back in his mind to the starting point of their relations. Where? Where is it? Salasov got off the subway, thinking about this, and everything he looked at swam before his eyes, gleamed iridescently, their forms distorted, and it seemed to him that he was thinking, analysing their relations, their feelings and actions, although in fact he was only asking himself agonizingly, until his head ached: "Why? Well, why?" Only this "why" sounded in various tonalities, with different degrees of intensity, and was driven into his head like a nail. He walked to the dormitory to meet Lobakov, but caught sight of him on the other side of the street.

"Vanya!" Salasov shouted, blinking and trying hard to look across the street. "Vanya!" he repeated and, fearing that Lobakov would disappear and he wouldn't meet him, he headed across the street, not hearing or seeing the speeding automobiles. Only when he was near the sidewalk did he feel a sudden fear, as if something had flashed before his eyes—out of the corner of his eye he saw a car close by, rushed forward—and at that moment he was hit hard on the side; spreading his arms wide, catching and groping for the ground, he flew onto the sidewalk, felt a

long, searing pain from his hip to his head, and instantly jumped up.

"Is it painful?" Lobakov ran up to him. "You scum! Have you gone blind, or what?!" he began shouting at the driver, who got out of his car at once and came up to Salasov.

"You should look where you're going!" the driver also began to shout, trying either to justify himself or to struggle with the fear welling up inside him: he could have run somebody over.

"It's nothing," Salasov answered softly, limping. "I injured my hip. I'll have to stay in bed awhile."

"You watch out!" Lobakov said to the driver. "You block-head!"

"You watch out yourself!" the driver answered. "It takes one to know one!"

"Get lost!"

"Don't you 'get lost' me!"

In the dormitory Salasov lay down on the bed, turned on his left side, and felt that he couldn't talk about anything, he didn't feel like either speaking or thinking. There was still an intense ringing inside him from the blow, everything whirled and swam before his eyes, and he was sinking somewhere and felt as if he were on a merry-go-round, and was slightly nauseous.

"He got off easy," Lobakov said, moistened his towel with water from the tea kettle, and, bewildered, stopped near Salasov, not knowing what to do with the towel. "He wouldn't have been able to pick up all the pieces. Anyway, I wrote down the number of the car."

Lobakov took off Salasov's pants and saw a crimson-violet bruise on his hip, long red scratches all over his shin, and a fine network of scratches on his knees.

"We need a doctor. Does it hurt? Is it painful right here? Do you hear what I'm saying?"

Salasov heard everything and answered—or so it seemed to him—but all he did was silently move his dry lips. Lobakov put the wet towel on his leg. At that moment someone knocked and, quickly looking around several times, he pulled the blanket off the neighboring bed and covered Salasov with it.

"Lyuda?! You've come just at the right time. A car knocked Viktor around a bit, and I think he's sleeping. I want to turn for a doctor and notify those people. You sit here for a while, and I'll be off."

Lyuda sat down on the chair and looked in bewilderment at Salasov lying there and at Lobakov, and then stood up.

"I'm going. Excuse me..."

"Where? Why?"

"He never drank, Vanya. Why, what happened?"

"What? How? What do you mean, never drank? Why? You... Why, he was hit by a car!"

"What do you mean, a car?" Lyuda hurriedly went up to Salasov. "A car? He has a fever, Vanya."

"I'll be back in a minute."

Lobakov slammed the door, and Lyuda sat down quietly, as if she was listening intently to something, holding her breath and afraid to stir. When Lobakov's steps died down, she took off her scarf, folded it slowly, and looked around—she remembered when she had seen him for the first time, how easy it had been for her to be with him, and how she thought then that she could totally trust this fellow, and for the first time she had felt confidence in him. She wanted to stand or sit next to him, touch his hands, look and think—only about him—and, whatever she did, to relate everything to him. And how later she waited for him to approach and say—it didn't matter what. And she imagined ahead of time how everything would be.

Lyuda looked fixedly at Salasov, at his pale, pinched face, then, holding her breath and listening for all she was worth, she approached closer and, bending slightly over the bed, stretched out her hand and touched his forehead. Steps resounded in the corridor. Lyuda quickly moved back.

"I covered all of Moscow", said Lobakov, entering. "The doctor's coming at six. Did he wake up?"

"What? No, he didn't."

Soon Salasov began turning, opened his eyes, and fell asleep again. A woman doctor arrived at six, gave him an injection, and Salasov no longer fell asleep.

"Overwork," the doctor said. "Nervous strain. Nothing special. He needs rest."

The door opened abruptly and Inna entered. She was wearing a thin light blue raincoat, suede steel-colored shoes, and a very tight gray dress which closely outlined her body. Her face showed dismay. Nobody looked around, nobody noticed her.

"If he catches up on his sleep he'll get better," the doctor said, writing out a medical certificate.

Salasov understood that he couldn't get up, since he felt a hot, pulsating pain in his benumbed right side, and he didn't want either to stand up or answer the doctor. He wanted only one thing: peace. And also to get rid of that "why" which he hadn't managed to lose during his fall. Before the doctor arrived something kept spinning before his eyes all the time—it seemed he had lost the main, perhaps the basic idea of his life, and although it stood right before his eyes, he couldn't understand that this was it, that he didn't even have to seek it.

The doctor got ready to leave, but didn't go. She kept waiting for something, as if she was trying to remember what else she should do, but, not able to think of it, she repeated:

"If he catches up on his sleep he'll be all better. It's from overwork."

Lobakov saw Inna and gaped in astonishment, not remembering at once that he had dropped in on her and told her that Viktor had been run over. When she opened the door for him, he could smell perfume and powder; she was about to go to the theater and wasn't ready yet. Lobakov's appearance was so inconvenient and frightened her so! God knows what she thought: that he had thrown himself under a car because of her! And how she hurried, the thought that Salasov had been run over was so terrifying, but somewhere deep down she was so flattered that he had done it because of her. She was so upset and had hurried so that when she saw that Salasov was alive and heard the doctor's words, she decided that they had deceived her.

"Why did you lie to me?! Is this the way you behave?"

Only now did Lobakov notice that Inna couldn't speak out of excitement; he was about to say something to justify himself, but she, measuring him with a contemptuous

glance, stamped out of the room, and this upset him and then angered him so that he walked around the room for a long time, trying to calm down.

"Lie down, I'll do everything," Lyuda said to Salasov and straightened out the blanket.

"It's not necessary, Lyuda, I'm not sick at all. I'm just very upset, but the car only brushed against me a little bit."

"Lie down, you're sick, you know!"

"I've never been sick in my whole life. And I won't be sick. I grew up in Siberia, and we Siberians are a hearty lot."

A day later Salasov moved to Murygin's, and after a month he was given a place in the factory dormitory. He regretted one thing, that when he saw her with a man he didn't walk up and say something beautiful and inoffensive, as in a romance: "I loved you, love, perhaps, has not yet died out in my soul..." Or: "You lost my love, well, my dear, find yourself another. Oh, I see you've already found someone? Congratulations!" Salasov buried himself in his work. He was the last to leave the shop, and he often stayed to work the second shift. Evgeni didn't lag behind him.

"It's my training," he repeated. "It's immediately evident that my training's at work: precise, accurate! How're things? Why is it you're always silent, Vitek?"

Once Evgeni approached Viktor, lit a cigarette, sat down on the box with half-finished products, and smiled slyly.

"You know, Inna hasn't been living at home for a month now."

Salasov pricked up his ears. He wanted to find out, nevertheless, that not only he, but she as well, was upset over what had happened.

"On the evening you left father threw Inna out. There was a real to-do! She's living at grandma's now. Father raised such a ruckus! I didn't expect it from the old fellow. Inna rebelled. You, she said, encroach upon personal freedom, you're violating the constitution. Mother has even lost weight, she wanted to run and invite you over. Strange

as it may sound, she's now repentant and is ready to ask your forgiveness."

"What do I care about them!" Salasov exclaimed, getting ready to go to the institute.

He handed in his pass at the entrance check-point. He had to go past a long brick building, turn the corner, and get on a trolleybus. Maria Afanasievna was standing around the corner. So that was why Evgeni had begun talking about it! When he saw her, Salasov turned aside, but she called out to him:

"Can I speak to you for a minute?"

Salasov stopped silently.

"That's what things have come to, but what should we do now? We have to go on living! You were in an automobile accident. Evgeni told me. My point is that everyone is unhappy and feels hurt sometimes, not everyone's life is sweet. Things could be even worse. If you think about it, some people have it a lot worse. It isn't such a misfortune. Take our neighbor—so many of her sons perished during the war... Of course one's own grief is more bitter than another person's. But you can always put yourself in someone else's place. How can you act otherwise? After all, we did so much for you..."

"But..."

"Father has simply gone mad. Talk with him, I beg you. I simply don't know how we're going to go on living. He can't just throw out his own daughter. Viktor... Viktor Petrovich! That's why I came. Have some respect for my old age. After all, it's so hard to get a Moscow registration, and we did that for you."

"I'll pay you for the time I lived with you."

"Viktor Petrovich!"

Maria Afanasievna wanted to smile, but nothing came of it, and she headed for the subway. She looked around at Salasov rushing towards the trolleybus.

It was pleasant to think in the silence of the reading hall, amidst books—the thoughts and feelings of others. He liked the reading hall—the whispered conversations, the long tables with table lamps, the high book shelves. He was even surprised that he had never sat for so long before amidst books, amidst such silence and peace.

It sometimes seemed to him that he had forgotten Inna. "I probably didn't love her so much since I've forgotten her so quickly." His thoughts pleased him. Only one thing was incomprehensible and frightened him: was it really possible that they, he and Inna, were now complete strangers! Was it really possible that they would never see one another again? He asked himself at once: "But why?" The thought that they had been as close as possible and had now become complete strangers, like passers-by on the street didn't sink in. Is that really the way it would be? It would be one thing if one of them had died, but they were still walking, talking, thinking, remembering one another, and now it was all an empty sound, they were dead for one another. In general was such a thing really possible?

Towards evening Salasov went from the reading hall to the buffet, and ate cheese tarts and drank juice. Once he met Lyuda there. She went to the buffet, bought a glass of juice, and, looking around, saw Salasov.

"Oh!" Lyuda cried out softly. She looked at Salasov and was silent, and her eyes became big and round. "I didn't think it was you. I thought... It seemed to me..."

"Lyuda, what's the matter?" Salasov asked.

"Oh, you mustn't," she said just as softly. "I don't know anything. Yesterday I did a certain thing and saw... and now you're here".

"What happened?"

"Nothing. Nothing in particular," she answered. "Now everything's all right. Don't worry about me, please. Nothing is hurting you?"

"But why don't I see you, Lyuda? I sit in the reading hall for days on end, but I don't see you. I want to see you, but it never turns out that way."

"I'm avoiding you," she breathed freely.

"Why? Why are you... avoiding me? Am I really such a monster?"

"I'm so abnormal. I decided to transfer here and now I run away. I'm so abnormal that I've even begun to get my fortune told. It's nonsense and I know it. I know it's a game, but I'm so abnormal..."

"Lyuda, you're like organ music. I don't understand it

at all, but when I hear it I feel like weeping, and feel sorry for someone."

"I like the organ very much," she said.

"Shall we go to a concert?"

"Perhaps," she agreed quickly and then became thoughtful. "No, I won't go," she shook her head. "I won't go. After all, I know that when you were sick in bed she came..." Lyuda bit her tongue.

"Who came?"

"I don't know. I won't go. Please don't ask me. You mustn't."

Salasov stood for a while in the hall and then returned to the reading hall, but he couldn't sit for long that day. "Is it really possible that she loves me?" he thought. "Is it really possible?"

Exams were coming to an end, but Salasov couldn't manage to meet Lyuda. She was avoiding him. And he decided that this was just what he deserved. He even gloated over his misfortune, over the fact that nobody loved him or had loved him in the past, everyone ran away from him—and that nobody had loved Lermontov either... Salasov found some consolation in this.

On the last day before leaving for work after he had passed all his exams, he sat in a dimly lighted little room where the entrance door once had been, where columns drowsed in the darkness and old tables and sofas stood, and the smell of old books came from a small door leading to the library (students ran from lectures into this little room in order to smoke, make declarations of love, or hide from the all-seeing eye of the dean). He sat and looked into the semi-darkness of the room, and thought of how long the institute building had been standing; there were students sitting in the room, and perhaps they were thinking the same things. They were walking somewhere and talking, but he continued to sit. Just then Lyuda entered the room, and he understood why he found it so pleasant to sit, think, and wait. Salasov sat in a shadow on a sofa and Lyuda didn't see him. She appeared in the gray door way—a gleaming white dress, hair piled high, but her face invisible, because the light was falling from behind. She stood for an instant in the doorway, as if listening for

something in the room, and, not noticing or hearing anything slowly walked far in, sat on a table, opened her handbag, got out a cigarette, examined it, and then lit it. Lyuda jumped off the table several times, as if afraid that someone would see her with a cigarette, but, not noticing anyone, she sat down again on the table.

"Lyuda," Salasov called her softly.

Lyuda looked around, but didn't notice Salasov, and putting out the cigarette, she jumped off the table and began hurrying towards the exit.

"Lyuda!" Salasov called loudly. Lyuda trembled and began running. "Lyuda, it's me!"

Salasov caught up with her.

"It's you?" she was astonished. "What are you doing here? It's so unexpected! What were you doing there? You're really a funny character, sitting alone in the dark."

"This is my last free day, tomorrow I go to work, and I decided to sit a while."

"Oh, and I thought something bad was happening. I thought I was hearing things. You know, I sometimes have sound hallucinations. I sit—and suddenly I hear a voice. Did you see I was smoking?"

"Yes, I did."

"All the girls in our group smoke, even more than the boys. But I'm afraid. I'm not too afraid when I'm alone, but I am when the boys are around. I don't smoke yet. I'm toying with it. But I'm making progress. So you saw me?"

She fell silent. They walked through the lobby. It was a light color and always seemed round to Salasov, like a sphere. Everything seemed to be woven out of air—the immense marble columns, high reliefs, the wall stucco, the high glass dome, and even the floor, gleaming under the light from above and faced with brownish-yellow tile.

"Lyuda, shall we go to an organ concert?" Salasov asked, looked at her, and blushed, thinking she would refuse, of course. How did he dare to invite her, he, who was so much at fault towards her, and such a pitiful and stupid person. Did he really dare to propose something to her?

"Fine," she answered softly and fell silent.

"Tomorrow. I have tickets," Salasov said quickly, fear-

ing she would change her mind. "At Mayakovsky Square. At six by the monument. All right?"

She nodded and quickly left.

XV

At work Salasov avoided conversations with the foreman and Evgeni, stood at his machine, and worked with excessive zeal.

"How are you, old man?" Evgeni approached. "Nothing about Inna interests you?"

"Nothing. Everything is over between us."

"You aren't thinking of divorcing her?" Evgeni asked in astonishment. "She's planning to get married. She wishes to drain the cup of marital bliss to the dregs. She was born under the sign of Sagittarius."

"Any time she pleases!" Salasov answered. "Tell her."

"That's the way, Vitek," Evgeni said calmly. "That's the way, old man, that's the way. It's all over with her! Give it to her good! Tear her nostrils with red-hot iron, spill the blood of the heathen! Go ahead and press, scream, tear..."

...The meeting started on time. All the workers of the shop came to the recreation room. Salasov saved a place for Evgeni, but since he was late for the meeting, Murygin sat down next to him.

First the shop chief spoke, then the chairman of the shop committee gave a report, and after a discussion, election of a new shop committee began. They brought in a blackboard made by special order of the shop chief, and began writing down the proposed candidates. Sikorin was the third to speak.

"I nominate to the shop committee the best turner in the shop, and I think that with time he'll also be the best turner in the factory—Viktor Petrovich Salasov," Sikorin said in an even voice and looked at Salasov.

Salasov glanced at the foreman, but the latter was listening closely to Sikorin. His name was written on the blackboard. A noise spread through the rows, Salasov thought that somebody would protest, and his forehead

grew moist, but they were cursing Evgeni, who was forcing his way through the tightly packed rows; he approached, stooped over, and looked around for a seat, but since there wasn't an empty one he squatted.

"There's a telegram and a letter for you," he whispered. "A fellow from the university, Vanya, brought the telegram. I grabbed some money for you—you can return it later. Take it, take it."

Salasov took the telegram and letter. The letter was from the magazine *Country Youth*. Hope welled up in him and he wanted to open the letter, but glanced at the telegram: "Mama is on her death bed. Come immediately. Liza." It was as if something snapped inside him, everything swam before his eyes.

"What is it?" Murygin asked, glancing at the telegram.

"The roof has fallen in on him," Evgeni said. "It's really ugly—after all, a roof isn't a loaf, it hurts when it hits you."

Salasov didn't remember how he made his way to the exit. He took a taxi, dropped in at the dormitory for his jacket, and hurried to the airport. The plane to Omsk was departing at five a.m.

He walked around the airport and kept repeating: "Mama, poor mama..." Five years had already passed since he had been home. He recalled his mother's trip the previous year and he felt ashamed of himself and immediately accused himself of all the deadly sins.

The dark sky hung low. Airplanes took off. Turbines began operating somewhere, and the air trembled spasmodically from the sudden din. There was a small grove not far from the airport; Salasov sat down under a tree in the grove and began looking at the sky steadily, observing the blinking red lights of the passing planes. It smelled of decaying leaves; a bird whistled forlornly in the branches; the bark of the old tree crackled above; the cold smell of honey billowed from the forest like a wave. It smelled like that time... What did it smell of? Of strawberries and leaves and decayed tree roots. He and his mother were mowing hay. He had a small scythe which he handled adroitly and with surprising strength. The grass was lying in even, moist rows. A young aspen wood was growing all

around, and at one point he waved his arms a little more strongly to cut down a small aspen with broad leaves. He waved. . . He caught his mother, who was mowing slightly in front of him, by the leg. She sat down, began groaning, and looked around at him. Her eyes expressed reproach and pain. She didn't say anything, she just groaned. No, he would never forget it! . . .

He began involuntarily to recall all of the unpleasantness he had caused his mother. The greatest unpleasantness had occurred almost a year ago. "No Salasov, do not seek salvation. You're a loathsome, vile person." And he punched his forehead, not knowing what to do with himself. To be ashamed of his own mother! The mother whom you love, who worked for your sake, wore herself out so that you would grow up and begin studying, a mother to whom you should bow down. . .

Dawn was already breaking when Salasov regained consciousness and returned to the airport.

"Why isn't the plane to Omsk flying?" at the information desk he asked the first thing that came into his head.

"The plane to Omsk is already departing."

"What?" shouted Salasov and began to run.

He flew up to the second floor, to the boarding area. At the entrance a woman in a uniform coat barred his way.

"Where are you going? Boarding is over!"

He almost knocked her over, flew through the long corridor, and dashed onto the airfield. A plane was roaring menacingly and, just as a long distance runner throws back his head, he cocked his nose and tore along the strip. Salasov dashed towards the plane, thinking at once that it was the one to Omsk taking off. "Faster, faster!!" Salasov hurried himself.

The plane was already quite close. It had just lifted off the ground and, its turbines roaring furiously, it was gaining altitude. Here was the runway. Salasov stepped into the concrete area and at that moment someone pushed him.

"You fool!" a man in a pilot's uniform yelled at him. "You fool! Did you feel like ending it all, you blasted turd?! Get off the field! Get off!"

"I'm going to Omsk," Salasov said, concluding that there

was no way he could stop the plane which was taking off. "My mama... My mama has died..."

"Have you lost your wits, or what?!" the man in the pilot's uniform was angry. "You felt like doing people in? Right? You crazy fool! Someone should bash you in the mug! You miserable idiot! Get away!"

"My mama is on her death bed, I'm going to Omsk..."

"Mama, mama...' We all have mamas! And the people in the plane don't have mamas? You would have destroyed all of them! That's not some kid's scooter! Omsk is still being pulled over there on a trailer. What, are you cracked? 'Mama!' What, did you get a telegram? Hand it over!"

Salasov gave him the telegram.

"That plane left for Tashkent. 'Mama!' Everybody loves his mama, because she gave birth to you, you fool. You blasted fool!"

"I thought..."

"A turkey also thought. 'Mama!' If she only knew who she had raised—all brawn and no brains. Your plane is over there, hurry up..."

Salasov climbed up to the plane, sat down and looked through the window all the way to Omsk, not touching the dinner which the young stewardess had brought.

In Omsk he silently got into a taxi and waved his hand.

"Downtown?" the driver asked.

Salasov nodded. When they were downtown, the driver asked:

"Maybe you want the Irtysh?"

Salasov nodded. The driver turned the taxi around.

"Here we are," the driver said, smiling.

"What do you mean, here we are?" Salasov came to and looked around. The broad Irtysh River was right in front of him. Houses stood beyond the river, and there were also houses to the left and right. The city! Omsk! But he needed the village of Kuzovki. "I'm going to Kuzovki," Salasov said. "Let's go to Kuzovki, driver."

"What Kuzovki? I don't know the place. Where is it?" The driver had a handsome pink face, high forehead, big gray eyes, and a regular, straight nose, the tip of which turned to the side. Salasov was also struck by his thin,

nervous lips. The driver smiled, thinking his passenger was drunk.

"It's a hundred kilometers from here. I'll pay you, driver. Go ahead and turn."

"I can't. It's not allowed," the driver didn't agree. "I can't, they won't let me."

"What do you mean you can't?" Salasov began shouting, thinking that now the driver would really dig in his heels and not take him to Kuzovki, although he had come from Moscow and was hurrying, and his mother was in a bad way. But the driver, you see, didn't understand this and didn't even want to know why he was hurrying, why he needed to get to Kuzovki so urgently. . . . Salasov looked almost with hatred at the handsome driver, carefree and still smiling. "Do you understand that I have to? I have to, do you understand? It's what I must do! I'm also a worker, like you, only I'm in a big hurry. It's so simple to understand what I need! Go ahead and turn around and onto the high road."

"I said it's not allowed. Do you understand Russian or don't you?"

"I'll give you it's not allowed!" Salasov grabbed the driver by the shoulder. "Either you go, you rat, or you don't go! I flew here from Moscow and you won't go?! I'll give you fifty rubles. And if you don't go, I'll lay you out, you rat, like the worst scoundrel!"

The driver looked around at Salasov and started the car. He kept squinting into the mirror to see Salasov, sitting on the back seat; his face had grown crimson, with brown swellings on his cheekbones, and it turned out that he wasn't as young as he had seemed to Salasov at first.

"Step on it," Salasov asked, got fifty rubles and slipped it to the driver.

"That's not necessary."

"Go ahead, take it, driver, take it, only step on it. I haven't been home for five years, and now I'm going when my mother. . . . I've endured a lot, but I won't be able to live through this!"

In an hour they were in the district center; at an intersection the policeman waved his hand and whistled to let

them know that they were breaking traffic rules, but the taxi driver didn't slow down.

In half an hour they were approaching Kuzovki. Salasov saw only the road and the fast approaching village, growing noticeably larger in his eyes. The village rose on a gentle hump in the middle, amidst birch and aspen groves and copses, yellow strips of recently harvested fields, winding country roads; from here, from the road, there was a good view of its only street, long and deserted.

Salasov decided that just at that time there was real grief in the house. They drove up. There was the yard and the kitchen garden. The house had an iron roof. It was the only house in the village with an iron roof. There was the porch. And it too had an iron roof. The house was neatly puttied and whitewashed. There was nobody in the yard except for chickens and geese. The door to the house was open—it was empty all around, and frighteningly quiet.

A table with plates, cups, and spoons on it stood in the middle of the room. The bed wasn't made either.

"Mama!" Salasov shouted. "Mama!"

He hurried to the yard and bumped into the neighbor, in the corridor.

"Where's mama?" he asked, fearfully expecting to hear something unbelievable, and that all his hope that his mother was alive, hope which flickered within him in spite of the telegram, would collapse.

"They went to get her," the neighbor answered, looking closely at Salasov. "I saw someone had come. I thought: who could it be at such a time? Maybe it's Vitek? Lord, how you've grown up! My Vanya is still in the service. He writes: 'Don't grieve, mama, I'll return.' I know he'll return, after all, there's no war now, only I'm sorry for him, for my Vanya..."

"Where did they go?" Salasov interrupted her.

"Who?"

"Why, my mama".

"Where would they go for the poor thing? To the hospital, to the district center, most likely. Oh, how she suffered! I don't understand what it could have been. I would come and she, your mother, would be alone, not a soul in

sight. 'Write,' I tell her, 'you have many sons and daughters.' But she didn't want to. It really got the better of her! It hurt here all the time, in the belly. It's beyond me, what was ailing her! God forbid that others should suffer and pine the way your mother did. I wouldn't wish it on my worst enemy. When it got the better of her, she couldn't straighten herself up or drink or eat. I would come and cook something or other for her. How did we live? We shared everything half and half. Both grief and whatever joy came along. She kept saying: 'If only I get Vitek an education and set him on his feet so he can make his way in life, then what else do I need?.. After that my life might as well be over.' Well, I would burst into tears. Her life was pretty grim, everything came hard, and it's no easier for me. So I myself was in tears and I had to comfort her. That's how the two of us lived."

Salasov understood. His mother had died. He stopped hurrying. The present was clear and frightening in its simplicity. What should he do? How could he live? He walked through the rooms, glanced at the photographs on the bureau, at his father's portrait, simply looked and no longer thought about anything.

"Would it be better if I left?" the driver asked, approaching.

"Wait. I'll go to the district center with you."

In the district hospital they said that Salasova, his mother, had just left for home.

"What do you mean left?!" Salasov cried out, thinking that he hadn't heard right or had gone crazy. His appearance was such that the doctor shook his head. "She's alive?" Salasov asked very softly.

"I told you that she left for home. Her daughter came for her. She has kidney stones."

Salasov dashed from the hospital and got in the taxi.

"Get back fast!"

It seemed to him that someone was deceiving him nevertheless and leading him by the nose. He didn't believe anyone now.

When Salasov caught sight of a cart with his sisters, Liza and Masha, sitting in it he touched the driver's shoulder with a trembling hand:

"Stop, friend."

His mother, in a white kerchief and plush jacket, was sitting in the cart and, turning, looked inquisitively at the taxi. She had grown very thin, her face was pinched, and her eyes, tear-filled from weakness, looked pitifully.

"Mama!" Salasov cried out quietly, in a shrunken voice, and rushed towards her. "Forgive me, mama!"

XVI

Salasov got into the cart and it began rolling along the country road, bumping over the pot-holes. His sister Masha left that same day, towards evening, crying and swearing that she didn't want to leave her mother, but she had left four kids untended in Tyumen, and she had to hurry back. Another daughter, Liza, remained with their mother. Childless, she lived alone in Barnaul after divorcing her husband. Liza took care of the hut, washed and cooked from morning to night, and was silent—there were times when Salasov didn't hear a word from her all day. Only she was sometimes angry at Masha, who had left. It was Liza who had sent their brother the telegram when Masha, who was keeping watch by their mother's hospital bed, sent a message with the collective farm accountant that Liza should ask the chairman for a cart to come for their mother. Liza got frightened and sent Salasov an express telegram. Liza was afraid of everything: if a door creaked she would tremble, grow pale, and, afraid to look around, would expect to see something terrible and would shake all over; if the neighbor's dog barked, she would prick up her ears, listen carefully, approach the window and look for a long time, her face again growing pale; if a car began banging on the street, she would spit three times over her left shoulder and whisper something. Liza believed in signs and dreams, especially frightening ones; she could tell fortunes for hours and cry if a bad one turned up. She was kind and compassionate, pitied everything and everyone, whether a man, a cow, or a chick. Only she didn't like dogs. And she had reason: when she was a child, the neighbor's dog bit her on the leg, and Liza stammered from fright for two years.

... Evenings Liza lit the samovar, and all three sat down and drank tea. Their mother usually asked her son:

"Well, Vitek, are you healthy? How are you there, in Moscow? Moscow is big, it doesn't pity or like newcomers. How's your dear wife? Won't she come and visit us? Why should she! She's a city girl, from Moscow..."

They sat silent for some time.

"I have to help you, mama. It's just like you to sit without bread and not ask your own son for money. I earn two hundred rubles a month and more."

"I don't need your money. And I don't need help. I don't need anything any more, my dear."

When money was mentioned, Liza distrustfully looked at her brother out of the corner of her eyes and muttered:

"Oh, how my brother lies! What has he dreamed up—two hundred rubles!"

"But you know, Liza, he is very much like his pa," their mother sighed. "Lord, why have You punished us so? Who in the world ever heard of a father who never saw his children with his own eyes? I don't remember such a thing in all my born days. And how he knew it would be a son. 'Name him Viktor,' he says. 'Viktor means victory. All the same,' he says, 'we'll be victorious.' And it turned out just as he said, as if a little bird told him. They were victorious, but he wasn't spared. Excuse me, children. I didn't want it that way, you know. Our lot was a hard one. It dropped by without being asked."

After supper they sat for a while outside and then went to sleep. Salasov woke up during the night.

There was a full moon outside the window which made it light in the hut, and his mother was sitting on the stool next to him and silently looking at him.

"Mama, why aren't you sleeping?"

"Sleep, son. I'll just sit and look at you for a while. Sleep. You'll be leaving soon, but I'm weak and decrepit. I don't know what keeps my body and soul together."

His mother's cheeks were glittering with tears, and Salasov began to feel so sorry for her he was beside himself. He decided not to go anywhere, but to sit by his mother, spend his whole life near her and comfort her in her old age. Here she was sitting, a withered and pitiful old wo-

man who meant more to him than his own self. How dear she was to him! And he was ready to give up his life for her... How could he comfort her? What could he do for her? After all, she deserved more than anything he might do.

"Mama, I won't go anywhere," he said, "I'll stay 'near you."

"You won't go?" the old woman was frightened. "Don't say such a thing, Vitek. Everything's decided, you'll be there. Anyone can stay by his mama's side. Is anything wrong there? Or what?"

"Nothing's wrong. Things are fine. I thought it would be better if I stayed."

"It's good to be together," the old woman sighed. "But it's better for you to leave. Watch out, the main thing is not to put on airs before people. And then they'll respect you." The old woman stood up. She was wearing a long, homespun linen shirt, and seemed more withered and taller in the darkness. "Don't argue that you're going to stay. Do I need much, son? A mother needs only one thing, to know that all's well with her children."

Salasov didn't answer and turned towards the wall.

The following day he received a letter from Lobakov.

"How are things with you, old man? What's new? I was terribly upset by the telegram you received, but I'm sure nothing will break you. I believe in you, old man. I don't want to console you. What do words mean? They won't help. If the same thing had happened to my mother, you wouldn't begin consoling me either, because words would be false. I believe only in you, in your nature, in what you haven't lost. Excuse me, old man, but you're still a child. You're immune to evil. When you got married, you puzzled me for the first time. But you didn't change, and I understood that you are the way you are. Hold out, old man. Let me tell you that I saw little Lyuda. When I told her of your odyssey, she blushed all over. She confessed that she had your fortune told and you were fated to her. Yes, you're lucky, old man. You can't even imagine, when she talks about you, she bursts into flame. The purest flame! Don't forget! One more thing. In the magazine *Country Youth* there's a story, 'Forest Rustlings', and its author is

Viktor Salasov. Is it your story? I congratulate you with all my heart. But I'm not surprised. I expect even more significant and momentous things from you. . ."

Salasov stopped reading the letter and dashed to his jacket, in the pocket of which he had stuffed the letter that time at the meeting. But the letter wasn't there. He rummaged through the whole hut. He finished Lobakov's letter and felt like seeing him and making him happy by letting him know that everything was fine.

. . . In the evening Salasov was silent and thought of what he had read. Liza unexpectedly started a conversation.

"You're thinking about your wife, are you?" she asked.

"Why, no. Not of anything in particular."

"Nothing or something, it's costing you dear, brother. Why, you're so down in the dumps. Don't let it get you down. Open up your soul."

"Liza, why are you mocking him?" their mother intervened. "I don't ask how things are with his wife. I see everything, son. Only one thing worries me. Other people are like real people, and the mother and father are buried as they should be, all in the same place, in the same churchyard, the way it is with us Russians. It's better that way, all the same. But we—it's as if we're strangers to mother earth: grandmother is in the city of Nikolayev, grandfather is in Kursk, and your father all the way in Germanland. Where will your mother lay her head? Only God knows."

"Do you still believe in God? You've lived such a life, and, just look, you haven't forgotten God."

"Well of course, son, why, is he a villain or of bad stock? I believed in him strongly. When they took away your father, I lit candles in front of all the icons every day and night and I prayed your father would stay alive and that God would kill the fascists. How I begged him and entreated him and lamented out loud, and observed every single holy day, and made you children observe them. What's easier than to fast during wartime! I said to him: 'Dear God, I've got ten children, one smaller than the next, and I don't have a single stick of firewood in the shed or a grain in the bin, there's nothing for them to wear and no shoes for their feet—have pity on them, keep their

father safe and sound in the war with the heathens, the robbers and plunderers, the damned fascists. Save their father for them, for he's flesh of their flesh, or else they'll have to wander around the broad world and beg for alms.' How I begged him and gabbed with him about everything, and tore the last crumb from my mouth to buy a candle, for I always wanted to propitiate him. I begged him, but he brought me the sad news and, just look, he laughed on that day. Yes, son, from that time I stopped praying to him, I pray to life not to leave us in misery and without our daily bread. Life alone, son, is our mother, she throws us down and lifts us up, she alone sets us on our feet and gives us a push, life does. How good it is to be close to one another, to touch a kindred soul with one's breath. What's bad about it?"

"Mama! Why, what are you saying, mama!"

"And what of it, son? Why hide the truth? How good it is that we're all together in a good, human way."

...Salasov sat in the hayloft until late at night. He recalled how he had wanted to bring Inna here. Bring her here! He laughed mockingly: "They're strangers now! And they'll scarcely get to know one another any better." Salasov became gloomy and thoughtful, and the thought whirled in his brain that his mother was right and it was time to leave.

The following day Salasov sat from morning to night on the mound outside the hut.

"You should go and water the sheep," Liza said.

Salasov found a twig and drove the sheep beyond the village, to a foundation pit.

Evening was approaching quickly. The air was warm and pliant, and it was easy to breathe; rooks screamed incessantly in the fields; a low fog was floating; the dim edge of the moon was rising above the distant misty woods.

The sheep descended along the steep slopes to the water and Salasov sat down on a hillock.

The milky smoke of the fog covered the fields and meadows; the blinking stars appeared low in the sky; as if in answer, the dim light of a bonfire was lit in a far-off field. Who could have lit it? In the village, sheep occasionally bleated and cows mooed, but otherwise it was as if some-

one has poured deep silence over the earth, the kind which makes you feel that the silence is also inside you, and should somebody shout out not far off you give a start, as if somebody has fired a shot over your ear. The water in the foundation pit, its surface black and smooth, was slumbering, and tiny yellow stars shone through it.

Salasov recalled how Lobakov had said that the time would come when people would seek a patch of green, to rest body and soul from the metallic-cybernetic life of the future, and he began to think about Lobakov, about the candidate, about Sikorin and the foreman, about his life, and he decided that during those two years he hadn't lived as he should, and he began picturing himself among the people he knew and saw: there he was at work, and there he was sitting at home and waiting for Inna, speaking with Sikorin or Lyuda. Salasov tried to look at himself objectively, to define his place in all things and places. Thousands, no, hundreds of thousands of people passed by, and each one gave him something, although they didn't suspect it, and therefore, he, Salasov, owed each of them something... What? Salasov looked at the field and suddenly he imagined: that wasn't mist drifting across the field, but people standing, and he, Salasov should do something for each of those millions of people. Do something for each? Yes, do it! This was probably the essence of man's life and of his, Salasov's life. And what he would do would be a part not only of himself, but of his mother and dead father, and of that foundation pit over there, of the forests and fields, a part of people themselves. It means that through him they will see what is good in themselves, what they must strive for, and in this miraculous way they will recognize themselves. And he would devote everything he had to this, and what he had was a single life. And he didn't begrudge it, because if at least a particle of the good which he let fall would live, then it means that he too would live. He didn't begrudge his life.

Salasov went down to the water. The sheep were lying by the water and contentedly chewing their cud. They looked at Salasov and continued to lie there. "Is it possible that they don't understand anything?" he thought. "Neith-

er my thoughts nor the silence all around—nothing at all?” He began walking right along the edge of the shore, and stepped close to the water, where he saw his blurred shadow and the yellow stars in the water’s depths, and his shadow floated above the stars. He walked and thought. And suddenly he was struck. He recalled what his mother and Pulkherin had said to him, compared one and the other, and saw that in essence they had said the same thing. They had approached it in their thoughts from different directions, the order of their thoughts was different, but the essence was the same, and this struck him so, that he sat down right by the water and could go no farther.

The small candle-end of the moon sank behind the forest, in the village someone shouted for a cow, geese answered somewhere not far off, and he began feeling amazingly good amidst this velvety darkness, amidst the nocturnal sounds. He began feeling so good that he wanted to undertake something at once and, forgetting about the sheep, he headed for his mother’s. He wanted to tell her that he was leaving tomorrow.

“Where are the sheep?” Liza asked.

“I’m going tomorrow,” Salasov answered.

On the following day Salasov left.

His mother tied a new white kerchief on her head and kept trying not to cry. Liza was also wearing all new things. She tried to please her departing brother, and kept repeating:

“Brother, what’s the matter, you’re not eating anything?”

They stood silent for a long time by the roadside and waited for a passing car. Soon the chairman’s car appeared.

“Where to?” the chairman asked, leaning out of the car.

“Well...” the old woman said and embraced her son, looking into his face. “Good luck, son.” She thrust a bundle at him. “Everything’s right here. I sewed it all myself when I got the letter. For my grandson. In our family I’ve been the first to sew things for my grandchildren.”

"What do I need the bundle for?"

"Take it anyway, son. Maybe it'll come in handy."

Salasov hurriedly embraced his mother and the tearful Liza, and hurried towards the car.

...The old woman and Liza silently looked in the direction where the car had disappeared. Liza turned and slowly ambled towards the village, but her mother kept standing there. There were tears in her eyes, she made small crosses over the road, and whispered with her benumbed lips:

"Dear road, keep him safe, my son, my very own... Forgive me for everything, son, forgive your mother..."

She bowed three times to the road and afterwards continued to stand for a long time, looking somewhere beyond the forest.

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After finishing school Shugayev was loader, builder and milling-machine operator at the Uralmash Engineering Works. In 1961 he graduated from Ural University with a diploma in journalism and contributed to various papers in the Urals and Siberia.

Shugayev's first long story *Midsummer Love* came out in 1965, to be followed by *Running Away to Return*, *Autumn in Maisk* and other stories dealing with contemporary Siberia, personal relations between different people and the moulding of character.

Vyacheslav Shugayev's books are very popular with the Soviet reader.

Vyacheslav Shugaev

FERRY BOAT across
the KIRENGA

1

Zina was getting ready to set off. A tightly stuffed brand new knapsack lay on the floor. Blowing a silky golden bang off her forehead, she glanced around with a look of doom: blouses, jumpers, and skirts lay heaped on the bed, the dresser, and the chairs—even three knapsacks wouldn't be enough to hold it all. She grabbed one thing, then another, and finally, in despair, began rushing about between the chairs, tearing away at the blouses and skirts and hurling them into the corner.

"The hell with them! I'll go stark naked, but I won't take it all with me. I won't take this! Or this! Or this!"

Little Vera threw up her hands in delight.

"Oh, Mama is being naughty!"

She squatted before the heap of clothing, frowned, shook her head reproachfully, and continued: "The girl is gone mad. There's just no holding her back!" Vera was pretending to be Grandma and the prattle of her voice amusingly yet faithfully captured her grumbling tones.

Zina laughed until tears came to her eyes, then grabbed Vera and tossed her in the air—a towhead in a yellow bur-lap dress.

"You're my sunshine! My little chicken! My little candy-dandy dandelion!" She kissed Vera's thin tender neck, her tremendous obstinate forehead, her skinny shoulders with their white down.

Zina's mother Maria Eremeyevna, worn out by all this messing about, sat on a stool by the door, leaning her hands on her knees.

"Go on, torment her, tear her heart out! What are you squeezing her for? Is she your doll, your fat-faced puppy? Let her go! What are you bawling for! Oh, Zina, you're a plague. What're you doing to me?" Maria Eremeyevna pulled the edges of her kerchief towards her eyes. "Why the tears now? Wait till you go away. Then you'll cry your eyes out."

"Stop it, Mama. We already agreed on everything. Now, who's tearing whose heart out?"

"So what that we have agreed? Does it change anything? I don't sleep nights. An old woman and a babe—how are we to live? Vera never had a father's tenderness, now she won't have a mother's either."

"I knew it! You're dragged it out to the last minute—and now you tell me you can't sleep nights."

"What did I say? All I want is that you remember at your new place that you have responsibilities, and not flit around like a little bird without children or any cares. You thought nothing of giving birth to a bastard—now listen to your mother, there's nobody else that cares!"

"Then why did you say: go, go, what're you waiting for?"

"I still say: go! Try your luck before it's too late. I missed my chance. The years slipped by while I took care of the two of you. I didn't make it. But I wanted it, oh, how I wanted it, to see the world, to travel! You go travel."

"Oh, Mama, you keep changing your mind." Zina wiped her tears with her palm and pulled the knapsack towards her.

...A long time ago, when she was still a girl, Maria Eremeyevna accompanied her grandmother on a pilgrimage

to Irkutsk. They walked about 200 versts, paid homage to the bones of St. Innokenty and walked back home. Other than that Maria Eremeyevna had never left the god-forsaken place which was her home, not on foot and not by car.

Having buried her husband, she raised her daughters Agrafena and Zinaida. She held several jobs at once—a watchman, a laundress, and a yardkeeper—to provide for the girls and give them an education too. Agrafena graduated from accountant school and went to Sakhalin, where she got married. Zinaida was trained to be a painter-plasterer, but she was unlucky in her men. Maria Eremeyevna never once met a boy friend, to say nothing of a fiancé. Vera, it seemed, had been delivered by the stork. And how Maria Eremeyevna had stamped her feet and carried on, trying to persuade Zinaida not to give birth, not to add to the number of orphans—there were enough in the world already—but Zinaida was stubborn.

Now they had Vera a beauty, the apple of her grandmother's eye.

All her life Maria Eremeyevna guarded, washed, swept yards and raised her daughters, and when she looked back on her life, it seemed to her that the best of her days remained on that sunny, peaceful, August road which she had walked with her grandmother on the pilgrimage. Straightening herself up over the trough or stopping, broom in hand, in the middle of the yard, Maria Eremeyevna loved to reminisce aloud:

"Grandma used to get dead tired. We'd sit down together at the side of the road, drink some kvass, or just plain water, chew on some bread with onion and egg, sit for a while. All around fields, meadows, forests—tinkling sounds, honey smell, faraway voices that rolled over you. I'd be in another world. We'd walk further. See how the people worked and lived. We helped too, sometimes—in the field, in the garden. And the amazing thing was that we never met any bad people along the way. Maybe I was too little to notice who was bad and who wasn't. They'd feed you, give you a place to spend the night and see you off with a good word. Maybe it's still like that. Don't know, it's hard to say. I haven't been travelling in so long. But

I think to myself—why should a Russian change? He'd have given you the shirt off his back then, and he'd give you the shirt off his back now."

Maria Eremeyevna looked after Vera without putting down her broom; the yard which she kept in order was right next door to her house, as was the store in which she worked as watchman. Having finished her shift, she'd quickly sweep the sidewalk and rush home—"on to the next shift"—and let Zina go off to work. Vera slept under a radio speaker. When Zina was home no sound came out of it. When Maria Eremeyevna was there it played at full blast—she was afraid she'd doze off, and god forbid Vera should hurt herself or swallow a button. Anything could happen. Vera had grown accustomed to the incessant rattling of the voice and even reminded Maria Eremeyevna to turn it on: "Granma, wadio", she would say, impatiently pointing to the black box. Maria Eremeyevna would throw up her hands and laugh:

"That's me, Vera, that's me. Your 'granma's wadio', pure radio. I talk away 24 hours a day without a break and noone can stop me."

Once Maria Eremeyevna heard on the radio that an elderly Englishman had set off to walk around the world. This so excited Maria Eremeyevna that she couldn't calm down for days.

"He's an old man already, my age, and he went off anyway. Why'd he get restless? Got bored, eh? I've been bored a long time already and I'm still staying put. The moss has already grown over me. Labour and sins are a burden," Maria Eremeyevna stared at Zina, "they take hold and won't let go. Maybe he'll drop dead on the way—he'd need two lives to make it on foot. And what if he drops dead? At least it will be with a clear conscience. He went to his grave doing what he dreamed of doing. Ah, if I could have wandered a bit. What I could have seen!"

The old Englishman who was crossing deserts and oceans long remained fixed in Maria Eremeyevna's imagination. His existence finally materialised in the form of a somewhat strange and unexpected suggestion which she made to Zina.

"Zina, what's with you, getting stuck in this hole of

ours? Come on, go somewhere. Travel some. See the world. At least go to Sakhalin to visit Agrafena. No, better to a new place where you have no relatives and you're all by yourself—it's awfully nice to live for yourself with no one else to worry about."

"Shall I go straight away? Or can it wait till tomorrow?"

"I'll stay with Vera. She'll be three soon and our turn is coming up at the nursery school. We'll manage without any help. Better take advantage, Zina, while I'm still standing. What're you waiting for? Your retirement? There are nothing but old people at your office. Aren't you sick of them?" Maria Eremeyevna lowered her voice and glanced over at Vera with a tear in her eyes. "Maybe you'll find her a father there. Settle down like a human being. Who will you find here in an old place that stands still? Not a road being built, nothing being made for the future. Go. You'll be thankful forever if you do."

"I'm not going anywhere! You've got everything planned, all accounted for, even spied a husband."

"You're a fool, Zina. It's at 22 you think you don't need anything. But the years are like a pendulum. Tick-tock, tick-tock, and it's too late to change your fate. The hell with him, with a husband. Just go. Have a look at the world, prove you're worth something."

"Easy enough to say. It's scary. I won't know anyone, no one will know me. I'll go crazy worrying about Vera."

"No, you won't. You're not leaving her in an orphanage."

Gradually Zina got used to the idea of going somewhere where no one was waiting for her or even knew that she, Zina Cheprasova, unmarried mother and best painter in the Sviisk repairs office, existed. The faraway region where she intended to live was, in her dreams, a wooded land, quiet, with clean thick meadows along the banks of a transparent peacefully-flowing rivers. Zina dreamed of soft golden evening sunsets, and a pinkish haze by the water. She saw herself sitting on a white river rock in a lazy bluish-grey twilight. She saw someone beside her, not with her mother's coarse pragmatism—"you'll find Vera a father and yourself a husband"—but in a tender twilight haze she saw him, her finally-found one, her desired one, her only one.

Only where was this blessed land? Maria Eremeyevna listened zealously to the radio and daily switched her geographic loyalties. Dzhezkazgan—"warm, lots of fruit. But nobody speaks any Russian. You'll be like a deaf-mute." Sinyegorye-on-the-Kolyma—"an interesting place, but terribly far away." Where was it, that land?

Once they talked about BAM. Zina listened and her heart fluttered: here's a really new place for you. Rivers, mountains, animals. In a word—a fantastic place. Stories about BAM evoked Maria Eremeyevna's constant amazement.

"Look what's going on there. Twice a day they give the weather report from that BAM place. I've lived 60 years and in all those years no one ever so much as mentioned whether it was raining or sunny in Sviisk. Nobody cares. But here they go telling what the weather is like in Moscow, and what the weather is like at BAM! Barometric pressure, temperature and forecast for the next 24 hours. Go on. Go there. It will be as if I hear from you everyday. Today rain is pouring on my little Zina. That means she ran to work in a raincoat, her hair tied up in a rain scarf. We'll consider that I see you everyday. Come on. Get ready."

Zina got ready and left.

2

She flew into Kazachinsk, an old taiga regional centre. She found out that it was another 12 versts to Magistralnoye, the BAM village, and that buses didn't run there, but that she could get a lift to the ferry-crossing from a truck going in that direction. "From there you can't get lost—it's just a stone's throw."

She walked through the narrow alleyways, soggy from the recent downpour, to the wooden arched bridge. She stood there for a while, leaning on the railing. Right now at the Sviisk repair office the manager "Uncle Kolya" was probably shouting in his high voice: "Cigarette break, gals", imitating the voice of his wife, Aunt Nina, who worked there too.

Zina glanced around. On the shores of the river were a few pussy-willows whose sad greenish-white necks bent out over the water; goose grass, stamped down by cows' hooves, gayly rolled right up to the fences of some dark gloomy-faced houses. "Here it is—the faraway land," Zina thought to herself. "So far no meadows, no transparent river with a white rock by its bank." While in flight, she had still been at home. Now it was for sure: she was all alone. 'No one familiar face! What will I do now?'

Under the bridge, in thick mossy duck-weed, a frightened drake-teal, who had inadvertently flown or swam bang in the centre of the village, hurriedly ate his breakfast. "You're not yourself. You eat as if it's stolen, with furtive glances. You don't know what to do with yourself either, eh?"

She came out beyond the edge of the village, the border of which was marked by a half-collapsed picket fence. She saw the road, laid between swamps, lakes, and islands of gloomy, threatening, dark blue fir trees. She hesitated, shivered, and then started along the road.

On the narrow pebble shoal which stretched away from the logging village of Klyuchi people, cars and two sled dogs, one red and one white, waited for the ferry. The dogs were alone, evidently either meeting their master or going home to him, and sat off by themselves with dignified patience.

Zina leaned toward the water. Transparent, rapid spurts of water brushed against the sandy bottom, and grains of sand swelled up in delicate, wavery swarms. These swarms settled down slowly but the river eventually knocked off the grains of sand and carried them away to the distant reaches of the larger Lena.

Zina looked at the other bank and laughed; on the wide sandy tongue, jutting out from clayey cliff, was a white rock—the boulder which she had sat upon in her dreams. "You've found your little white rock and your little transparent river. What more do you need, Zina?"

As the ferry's iron bottom began to crush and grind the pebbles beneath it, a jolly ruddy-faced ferryman jumped out of the wheelhouse:

"Hey, romantics, damn you! Forward, cars. Technology

decides all. Hey, where do you think you're going all at once?"

The two dogs jumped on first and gracefully and assuredly made their way onto the roof of the cabin.

The jolly ferryman started to shout again:

"Well done, dogs! Without any hullabaloo, got yourselves the best damned seat! In a mo!" and he dove into the cabin and set out some food for the dogs. They sniffed it, took it a piece at a time and sat motionless, their dark bluish-grey eyes blinking intelligently.

A young tough approached Zina. He was pock-marked, pale and dishevelled, and bottles were sticking out of the pockets of his oversized jacket.

"You've come to BAM
Come and share a pot of jam!"

he sang stridently. Zina realised that he was drunk. She turned back to the water.

"Come. I invite you. Birthday, Semyon's birthday! Yeah, I have a party. We live on our salary, have parties on our bonuses!" The boy looked her in the face, leaned unsurely toward the boatside cable, rolled back from it like a tried boxer, and jerked up his arms in a salute-like gesture. "I invite everyone. Tent No. 3. Semyon Khudyakov. Fancy bast-shoes mine!" he broke into a song again.

A thin leathery-faced man with black eyebrows climbed out from a new jeep and dragged Semyon Khudyakov away from the cable.

"For everybody else it's dry law, and for you wet law, huh? Look at this 'BAMer!' Birthday party in the middle of the morning. Come to, Semyon Khudyakov!" The man supported the tottering Semyon with one hand, and with the other quickly pulled the bottles out of his pockets and tossed them into the water. "When you come to, you'll thank me. Or at least you'll stop and think why you came here." The man threw out the last bottle and a long pitiful moan sounded from somewhere above. It was the ferryman who couldn't contain his anguish.

"What are you moaning for?" the grey-haired man asked looking up. "Why not dive for them?"

"Never mind, Vladimir Pavlovich." The ferryman jumped back into the cabin. "My business is to steer the rig and contemplate life."

"And then what? So you contemplate, and then?"

"Come to conclusions, Vladimir Pavlovich. No buts about it. I'm going to be the boss at the Kirenga Station. You'll hear about me. Not only the people around here are gonna hear about me."

"You've been contemplating a long time and still no conclusion that I heard of."

Zina heard someone behind her ask in a half-whisper: "Who is that guy?" And someone answered in a half-whisper: "The Secretary of the district Party committee."

Semyon Khudyakov sat down on a bitt, dozed off, then jerked up right suddenly, and began to roar in a shaky voice.

"Nothing's going right! They gave me a car—I smashed it up, my girl doesn't write, and I'm drunk and that's all there is to it. Who needs a birthday? Nothing's going right. Nobody needs me." He turned his head and wiped the tears off his pale freckled face. Vladimir Pavlovich took the bucket off its hook, lowered it over the side of the boat and brought it back up filled with water.

"There y'are, drink up, wash up. Everybody needs you. You'll sleep it off and everybody will need you."

Semyon, sobbing, sponged himself down and drank out of the bucket for a long time. He was so pitiful and lost that Zina had to turn to wipe away a tear.

"Just a little fool who's still wet behind the ears. His mother must be terribly worried about him". She sighed and went back to watching the river. The ferry had just reached deep waters.

Colourful islands, all abloom in reddish-gold September rose willows, sailed by one after another. Along the river, past these pretty dots of colour, went ugly grimy-faced tugboats and barges loaded down so heavily with tractors, **dump trucks and bulldozers** that their sides were barely visible above the water's surface. The shore, decorated in silverish-yellow alder thickets and golden birchwood, arched out, floated, and melted in the blurry distance. The land nearest to the ferry could be seen more clearly; it was

crumpled, turned inside out by caterpillar tractors and bulldozer blades.

3

Zina was walking along the mooring which had obviously been slapped together in a great hurry. Winches screeched, automatic cranes roared, tugboat whistles sounded huskily and barrels of fuel oil rolled rumbling to the trucks' bodies. On a high cliff, some distance from the mooring, about a dozen metres of rails had been laid and one beleaguered car stood on a portion of the rail. It had no windows and was covered in metal blinds and bolts. Zina decided that this must be the beginning of the Baikal-Amur Railroad and that the railcar had been placed there instead of a monument to show where the railroad would be laid. She approached the car, balanced herself on a rail and stood thus awhile thinking: "That's it! I'll start walking from here. Maybe all the way to the Amur River."

She reached the tent camp via a small clayey ravine and immediately asked where she could find the manager.

"There he goes, in the hat", and they pointed to a husky plumpish man who was wearing green overalls, high fishing-type boots and a small shaggy hat which resembled a forage-cap.

"Hello," Zina said, having caught up with him. "I've come to work for you."

"Real glad. You alone?"

"Seems so."

"Wanna work as head of a train?"

"Head of which train?"

"A builder-train. You can take my place."

"I'd be better off staying a painter-plasterer. Are they firing you?"

"No, but they will if I take on as much as one more person." He stopped. "Let's introduce ourselves. Bugrov. Cheprasova? Glad to meet you. A whiner? No? I'm thrilled. Then listen: I'm not taking you on, Comrade Cheprasova. Don't argue or explain or swear—it's useless. Won't take you. Good luck. Hope we don't meet again."

"You could have asked something. We don't see each other every day."

"I know everything, I've heard everything. You wanted to swallow a mouthful of real adventure . . . so you'd have something to tell your kids . . . right?"

"Not at all. I'm here, now give me some work. I won't leave you alone until you do."

"I know that approach too. You'll leave me alone. You have a conscience, you'll leave me alone. If you don't have one, we'll send you packing. Adieu."

"They talk about you, write about you, praise you to the skies, but you, you . . ." Zina hesitated.

"A bureaucrat?" prompted Bugrov.

"No."

"Red-tapist?"

"No."

"An egghead, a boor, a peacock?"

"Not those either."

"Sorry, can't get any more elaborate. You'll call me foul-mouthed."

"You've been having it too good. There's no conscience left in you."

This got through: Bugrov shrugged his shoulders, made a helpless gesture and wrinkled up his fat face with its turned-up nose. He kept quiet though, stooped and waddled off sadly.

Zina looked around in dismay and started with surprise: a woman's face, large-eyed and large-lipped, soared above glimpsed through the rows of tents. It had been hewn out of an enormous pine tree stump and mighty roots whimsically embraced the face, recalling the wings of a bird just taken flight. The woman's eyes were widened in surprise and the thick lips were opened in a smile—she had seized the spirit of the take-off.

The surprised and angry eyes seemed to be driving Zina away from the clearing: "What do you want here? Where did you come from?" they said. She trudged off from Magistralny's main clearing and sat down on a bench in the dining tent.

Trucks full of noisy happy young people drove up to the billowing tarpaulin walls of the construction canteen

tent. The men arrived in the bodies of the trucks, the girls in the cabs. The tarpaulin roof of the canteen tent puffed out and flapped under the pressure of voices and laughter. Zina, heart broken that she did not belong among them, gave a subdued sob. Someone quickly responded with a long heavy sigh. She looked up: across from her, on a bench, sat a dark curly-haired boy with mournful eyes.

"Making fun of me, huh?" asked Zina.

"Why should I make fun of you? It's tough enough for me. I may start to cry myself. You're come and you're staying, but I'm going back." The boy spoke with an accent.

"Did you come from far away?"

"Uzbekistan, Raschid's my name. That's what they called me there. Here they don't call you anything. Nobody ran up to meet me when I arrived. I thought—BAM, big construction project, I can at least work as a watchman."

"Why as a watchman?"

"One of my arms is no good. It doesn't work." Zina saw that the boy's left hand was stuffed in his jacket pocket. "I finished the road-building technical school, know a lot. No arm, but I've got a head. Do they not need any brains on BAM?"

"Now they need hands, and not just any hands."

"But I thought right now they need Raschid. Later is no good. They'll finish everything and they'll only need passengers. I'm not a passenger, I... I talk to the manager. Make me a watchman, I say, I'll walk around in a sheepskin coat. No need for a watchman, he says. No thieves. I answer: what do you mean, no thieves? Then who stole my stuff at the Irkutsk railway station? Maybe they're all coming here too. Nothing for them to do here, the manager says. They don't know how to work and here you have to work. Then I told him there's always a need for a watchman. The peg's already driven in—I could guard that. Lots of watchmen are needed. Let me be a watchman. He wouldn't agree. Raschid will have to go back."

"How did they rob you?"

"I was tired and fell asleep. They took everything, even my coat. I had covered myself with it."

"And your money?"

"Money, too. I'm surprised I didn't hear anything."

"You must be hungry." Zina turned away, unbuttoned her blouse and took the handkerchief in which she had wrapped her money out of her bra—Maria Eremeyevna had recommended she keep it there. She handed Raschid three rubles. "Go have something to eat, or you won't make it home. And you'll be too weak to be a watchman."

"Thanks, miss. But I don't feel like eating. What will I say when I get home? They saw me off like a real person. They'll ask: why did you go Raschid? So that a strange girl could stand you dinner? Shameful. To go so far, and getting back is even farther. Raschid, Raschid, how come you've been unlucky all your life? Thank you, miss. Come to Uzbekistan. We'll remember how we met at BAM."

4

"And what will I say at home? Bopped around and came back. Mama will nag me to death: you silly goose, she'll say, once in a million years you get the chance to take your fate into your own hands and you let it slip by. Now sit in Sviisk, we'll see what you get out of it. And a silly goose I am."

Zina saw Bugrov again returning from the tent camp. She jumped up and threw herself at him.

"Comrade Bugrov! Take me on! You must! I can't leave."

"Hey there! Long time no see. Now take a look over there." Bugrov pointed to three young fellows who were sitting on rucksacks on a hillock beyond the ravine. All had wide cheekbones and shoulders as broad as a mountain. Their shirts, open at the throat, revealed thick bronze necks. Mighty warriors, no less. "See what gorgeous men! First-class loggers. I'm crying, but I'm not taking them. I can't."

"By the way, I haven't got money to leave on. There's enough for a little food, but not enough for a ticket. I didn't think you'd run me off."

"Sweetheart! I've heard it all! I'm ready to give up my salary just so you won't give me a sob story. I've already

sent two off at my own expense—I couldn't get rid of them any other way. Don't tell me you come under the beggar category too."

"I'm not begging, I'm asking. What should I do now? Drown myself? It's not far to the river..."

"Then you'll never be able to work for the BAM. Discussion over; all's been said and finalised. Goodbye, give my regards to Mama."

"If she could only come here, you wouldn't know what hit you."

Zina left her knapsack and suitcase in the girls' overnight tent and went to have a look at the permanent settlement which was being built two kilometres from the tent camp. She took a shortcut through a field where two helicopters were unloading. Out of the larger one they were dragging crates of glass and slate, and packages of oakum. Out of the smaller one—canned foods, oranges, apples, boxes of chocolate and biscuits. Zina watched with interest. She had never seen helicopters from so close up before. The unloaders were hurrying each other, shouting: "Let's go, let's go". Their dusty faces were shining with sweat, but they didn't slow their pace for a moment, always at a run. Zina guessed that this was so the helicopter wouldn't have to sit there for long. "You have to pay for a plain old truck, if it stands idle, and for this, just think what every minute must cost." For some reason Zina's perceptiveness consoled her and she walked into the permanent settlement with renewed hope: "Everything will work out yet."

She came upon some squared beam houses and off to the side of them saw a bunch of unassembled mobile homes. On a hillock, closer to the pine forest, was an almost finished structure. Judging by its size, it could have been intended to serve as a club, a school, or a dining hall. Large stakes made of larchwood stuck up out of the reddish-grey soil. They had been soaked with antiseptic which ran down their sides in tarrish tracks, and from a distance made the impression of bare legs which had just waded across a river with silted bottom.

Zina immediately noticed the odour of oil paint in the humid, chilly pine air. She rejoiced and rushed toward

the smell, as toward an old friend whom one meets unexpectedly in some distant place. Three girls were painting kitchen panels with the windows open. Inside one could see an enormous and awkward stove. The girls did not know how to paint. They spread the colour too thickly and the brushes moved with difficulty, in short dabs, failing to spread the paint in a thin layer. They wrapped the brush handles in handkerchiefs. A real painter would never do that—it's awkward and doesn't protect the painter's hand from paint anyway. A roller, which evidently had got stuck in the thick paint, stood in the corner. Zina said with assertive impatience:

"Girls, hello. Can I help you out? My hands are itching to."

"A new one. Where from? Where'd they move you from?"

"From nowhere. Straight from the plane and to you. Well, may I paint a little?"

"You're welcome." A tall swarthy girl with dull blue eyes handed her a brush. "I'll be Tom Sawyer for a while."

"Right away, right away." Zina leaned over, poured some drying oil into the paint, mixed it nimbly, took the roller, spun it and dipped it in the paint; not spilling a drop, she made an even light blue strip on the wall which was exactly flush with one panel. The girls put down their brushes and walked off. Zina bit her lip and quickly rolled off one wall, another and another.

From behind her the tall swarthy girl said gayly:

"Aren't you dashing it off? One can see you're straight from the plane. Take a breather, cool off, you're steaming already. You wouldn't happen to be the painting instructor?" They squatted by the stove to take a rest together. In fact, none of the girls had held a paint brush in her hands until this fall. One had been an accountant in a catering office, another a kindergarten teacher. Asya, the tall swarthy one, had been a crane operator at a construction site.

"No wonder I liked her best of all", sighed Zina.

"And I, girls, am a grade A painter." Zina sighed, complained about Bugrov, about her bad luck, about her surprise at not being able to find work at the BAM.

The girls nodded sympathetically and said: "It's the beginning. It's always like that at first."

"I just don't know what to do. Nowhere to sleep. Maybe I can find a bush to spend the night under."

Asya asked, "Are you going to be stick it out or, will you leave right away?"

"Of course I'll try to get what I want."

"Then this is what you do. Get off the ferry at Klyuchi and climb right up the hill. You'll see a house with a green front yard fence. That's Aunt Fenya's house. Tell her Asya sent you. I lived there two months—there was no room in the tents. She'll let you stay there. She's a good soul."

"Asya! Thank you."

"Don't let it get you down! You're a painter, and painters sell like hotcakes in Kazachinsk and in Klyuchi. In any case you can wait a while."

"No. I came to work at the BAM. Painters, Asya, are in demand anywhere."

"True."

Aunt Fenya turned out to be a young, strong, rosy-cheeked woman. Having heard Zina through, she laughed. "Auntie indeed! Asya's a funny one, I never could unlearn her. How old are you? Uh-huh. Well your 'aunt' is 25. Don't you start calling me 'auntie'. My man already laughs about it. Comes home from the forest and yells from the street: 'Aunt Fenya, did you heat up the bath?' You'll live in the little side room. I haven't even moved the bed out. Okay, okay. You'll pay as much as you can. I take renters because it's interesting, not for the money. Saving workers for the BAM."

5

Now Zina would go across with the first morning ferry to Magistralnoye and in the evening returned to the mainland, to Klyuchi, which was for her essentially a continuation of Sviisk where her former quiet days seemed to overtake her. Ah, to cross the Kirenga once and for all, and remember the abandoned shore only as one remembers a familiar landing stage, obscured beyond the river's bend.

She dropped into Bugrov's office from time to time and if she found him in would ask:

"Will there be any changes, Comrade Bugrov? I'm tired of waiting and besides, there's nothing left to wait on."

"Who are you trying to outmanoeuvre?" Bugrov moved his cap down onto the back of his head and tapped a finger against his hard forehead. "Me? I'd have given in long ago. You want to outmanoeuvre the personell list. I doubt if you'll succeed. It'd be easier to build the BAM single-handed."

"You have so many people—all that noise over there. Don't tell me you can't squeeze in one more person! What kind of a manager are you anyway?!"

"I am what I am. Haven't you complained to anyone about me yet?"

"Why should I?"

"It's always easy to find a reason. Write somewhere and raise hell."

"You wouldn't take me anyway."

"Right, I wouldn't."

"Well then, see you in a while. Maybe I should drop in mornings and evenings. This morning no work; maybe tonight there will be."

"You can sit around all day if you like. I'll even supply you with your own personal stool."

Before going to Postoyanni to see the girls, Zina usually stood for about an hour on a clearing that was a temporary shopping centre where the earth had been whipped and battered by the wheels of heavy trucks. It was from here that the workers set off: to cut a lane in the forest for the future railway, to raise an embankment for a road to the moorage, to build a dormitory, a dining hall, a club. Young men swiftly and noisily stuffed themselves into the bodies of trucks, the names of cities flashing by on the backs of their jackets: Bratsk, Angarsk, Shelekhov. The signs rocked and shook because of the bumpy road, then faded away and melted into one. The trucks picked up speed and the loose ends of girls' headscarves fluttered in the wind above the truck cabins—red, yellow, and pink wings flapping above all the cities. Zina forgot her problems and squinted happily as though the trembling wind

was beating at her face and the loose end of a headscarf was cracking like a whip behind her. She imagined the cities whose names were printed on the backs of the men's jackets, a solid support behind her.

Then, remembering all and saddened once again, Zina walked across the clearing to Postoyanni swinging a small parcel of overalls. The tender chill of the worker's road remained on her cheeks.

The girls greeted her as they would their own sister, but their joy was mixed with a share of sympathetic respect: the girl is talented and she's been beating her head against a wall for three weeks already.

"Zina, our unofficial foreman."

"Did you see Bugrov? Again 'no'?"

"Hello, hello, my sweetheart, let me kiss you." Swarthy, impetuous Asya, flew onto her. Zina got along especially well with her.

Zina changed and began to teach the girls the trade. She showed them how to press down, how to comb the brush so that it doesn't "strip", how to "draw off" panels so they don't "cry" and icicle-like drips don't fall beyond the lines, how to choose the colour of the panel to match the colour of the white wall.

During the breaks Zina and Asya sat on a larch log under a hawthorn bush full of large flaming-red berries.

"Oh, Asya. I'm sick of hanging around. If there were some hope..." She paused. "At night I get on the ferry and don't know where to go. It's cold on the river, empty."

"How is it you came without a voucher?"

"Who knows? I didn't think about it. They probably would have given me one. I was in good standing, after all."

"Zina, I have a feeling!" Asya hugged her. "Everything will work out; you'll start a new life yet."

"If only. And I miss Vera something awful. I dream about her at night. And in the daytime I fancy I see her. I wonder how they're doing."

"Who's Vera?"

"My daughter. You mean I didn't tell you I have a sweet little baby? A darling ray of sunshine."

Asya's blue eyes rounded with curiosity:

"So, you were married?!"

"No, I just had Vera."

"He left you, right Zina? Deceived you?"

"No, Asya. Nobody deceived me. A man came on a business trip. He fixed refrigerators in stores and I was laying tiles in one. We met and started seeing each other... When he left I already knew. He had a family. What could I say to him? I didn't even want to let him know. Mother tried to persuade me to make an abortion, but I had already made up my mind. I was bored, hadn't found my niche in life. And now there's Vera—my golden one, my little sweetheart."

Asya embraced Zina ardently: "My dear one! Zina! How I love you!"

6

Asya's fellow-townsmen Mitya came to visit almost every day. He was red-haired, blue-eyed and shy, and had just recently gotten out of the army. He was working as a carpenter in Postoyanni and his shyness, it seemed, kept him from getting close to anyone in his work-team, and so he was drawn to Asya, his classmate and neighbour from faraway Tulun. He would come, sit down with the girls on the larch log, smoke silently, blush, and painstakingly, very seriously, wrinkle his pink freckled forehead. Asya made fun of him constantly and viciously, as if he was not a fellowtownsman, but rather her worst enemy.

"Oh, if it isn't Silent Sam!" Asya greeted him cruelly, "Kiss the girls and make them cry! Solve the riddle girls: not drunk, but can't even stand, didn't eat, didn't drink, swallowed his tongue instead. Who is it? Give up? The Tulun gopher. Lazy Mitya."

He gave a tortured laugh, and his ears and neck became so red they seemed to glow. "What won't she think up next? Why's she always after me?"

Zina felt sorry for Mitya and asked: "Where did you scratch your hand? I'll bandage it for you."

"It's nothing. It'll heal." Mitya smiled gratefully: his thick chapped lips parted awkwardly to reveal perfectly

molded teeth as white as pearls. "I was foolin' around with a dog. She grabbed at me, just in play."

"That's him!" Asya laughed scornfully. "He's done his service in the army and he still plays with dogs."

When he left, Zina jumped on her: "Why are you like that? A nice quiet boy. It's obvious he misses home. You're the closest friend he has here, and you lash at him like a whip. And he takes it and takes it. He looks up at you like a poor little puppy dog."

"Oh, leave off. He's a sap, I don't like his kind. He was the same back home. He'd come to visit and I thought he'll invite me somewhere—to the movies or a dance. But he stayed in the kitchen with grandma. I'd get angry and kick him out. He scared off all my suitors and then went into the army himself. I can't stand him!"

"Maybe he loves you but doesn't dare say so?"

"Sure! I need his love like a hole in the head. Keeps quiet, but something's jumping in his eyes—little devils of some sort. A cunning one. I know those gophers."

Dispirited by Asya's hard-heartedness and constant mean-mouthing, Mitya turned his simple, freckled face toward Zina more and more often, and rarely lowered his smokey-sad blue eyes in her presence. It was as though he peered into her sympathetic compassionate soul and found there a loneliness similar to his own. He would smile with his awkward lips and tell, for example, how he caught black grouse with a horse-hair trap, or suddenly, without any transition, would start to click his tongue in an evocation of a singing wood grouse. Then he would turn very red and with a wave of his hand would say: "No big deal."

Asya would laugh.

"There. He's found a grandmother. Now you're like my grandmother. And if you start nodding your head in agreement to everything he says, then there's no buts about it—pure grandma."

7

He always accompanied her to the white rock on the sand spit. Sometimes with Asya, more often alone. When Asya was there, he was quiet and weakly fought off the

teasing, shaking his head: "Why is she always after me?" Without her, he showed Zina hawthorn bushes, meadow-sweets and picked berries and leaves for her. All this with an animation which somehow didn't match his homely face.

"Look what goes on on this earth of ours. A man gets tired, overanxious, cooks some berries, drinks up and he's like a new person. In the fall the meadow-sweet has delicious juicy leaves—good in salad. Even now—try it, chew some, your mouth is fresher instantly."

"Mitya, how do you know all this?"

"Picked it up here and there. I've been roaming the taiga since I was a child. I've already saved up some ash-berries and dried them in the sun. If you want, you can try some tomorrow."

"I'd like that." Zina had to admit she wasn't very interested in birds, dogs, or grasses, but, unlike Asya, she saw in Mitya's passion unquestionable warmth and goodness.

By the white rock he shook her hand in farewell, and invariably said: "Bye, Zina, don't worry. We'll think of something."

On such evenings, she stepped onto the ferry light-heartedly, turned, and waved to Mitya who would be sitting on the white rock. A hazy greyish-blue mist zigzagged on the water's surface and a crescent moon appeared among the pale stars, and at once dropped into the rapid jets of the Kirenga, its silver face all puckered up and get entangled among the subdued, shadowy islands covered with rose-willow. Evening entered Zina with remote tilting melody.

The ferryman's loud hoarse voice interrupted it:

"Zina, haven't the trains started running there yet?"

"They're humming, Vasya. Don't you hear?"

"And how are things with you?"

"The same, Vasya. They won't have me," Zina answered merrily.

"So why are you happy?"

"Tired of bawling, so I'm being happy for a change."

"Come be my mate. It'll be terrific. I'll give you a sailor's vest. Make a man out of you."

"Scared, Vasya. I can't swim."

Often Zina's old acquaintances, the red and white sled dogs, would wag their tails and stretch out their intelligent kind faces towards her hands: pet me, be nice to me.

8

Fenya the landlady put a plate of fish and potatoes and a mug of milk in front of Zina.

"Your stomach's probably stuck to your back by now. Nothing again?"

"Thanks, Fenya, I'm not hungry. Nothing or something, I still had to go."

"Eat, I say, A girl's got to eat. Don't tell me someone treated you to a dinner."

"The girls took me to the canteen. A little while ago."

"What did you use for money?"

"Didn't you hear me say the girls paid."

"Well, it's your own lookout. I thought you were famished. Had I known, I'd make you dance for your letter. Here, take it."

Zina snatched at the envelope and, waving it as she would a kerchief, danced a few steps round Fenya, patted her on the cheek, and rushed off to her room.

Her mother Maria Eremeyevna wrote: "Daughter, here's what I want to say. You tell me things are fine. Don't lie. There's always something wrong in people's lives. If it isn't one thing, it's another. I ought to know. Tell me about your job, and how much you're supposed to earn, and what the girls are like in your team. Don't have too much truck with the girls. They've got things on their mind a mother shouldn't have. Try and be independent: don't go dancing unless you're invited. Never go on your own. Don't giggle, or squeal—men like the prim kind, not the flighty ones. Don't be cross I'm reminding you, but it's hard going through life alone. Didn't you see what a time I had with you children? Little Vera is fine. Playing at my feet this very moment. At first she kept asking where's mummy. Now, she asks less, though I speak of you every day—either to her or to myself. And the radio keeps announcing the weather on the BAM. Good thing you've taken lodgings with family people. They'll keep an eye on you. See you

help the landlady. Scrub the floors now and then, and help with the washing. You say she doesn't charge much. Well, help then, show you're grateful. She must be a good sort. That's about all for the present. Kisses from both of us. Main thing, don't fall ill and keep yourself warm."

When falling asleep, in the sweet dark of slumber, Zina pictured herself a mature lady—even-tempered, unhurried, and matronly—walking down a street with Vera, and the neighbours greeting her respectfully.

The last thought before falling asleep was that she wouldn't yet tell Mitya about her daughter. He's kind, and is bound to like children.

8

A week later, the girls in Postoyanni were unusually silent when she came. They'd cast a quick guilt-laden glance at her, then avert their eyes.

Asya asked:

"Have you seen Bugrov?"

"No. Why?"

"He was here a minute ago." A cherry-red blush suffused the dark skin of Asya's cheeks. "D'you know what he said? That we shouldn't let you paint any more. Says we mustn't give you any false hopes."

"Good heavens," Zina sank on to the paint-smeared stool. "Dind't any of you say something?" She began sobbing, though an instant ago she hadn't meant to.

Asya sat down beside her and wiped away the tears with her soft warm palms. The blush on her cheeks had become darker still.

"We're idiots, Zina! Hopeless idiots. We didn't know what to do. We kept quiet. Forgive us." Asya jumped up, pulled off her kerchief and squeezed it in her fist. "He's around here somewhere. Now, Zina, now! We'll tell him everything. That little boss!" Asya rushed off and the girls went after her.

Zina didn't get up from the bench. She leaned over and gazed dumbly at the dirty unpainted floor. The girls returned subdued and discouraged.

"We screamed and shouted and begged. He said: 'Go back to work. Don't make a scene during work hours. I know it all myself.'"

Asya sat down beside Zina again.

"Zina, I told him that I'll quit too, that I won't work with a manager like him, that it's awful and disgusting. Did he yell? 'Get the hell out of here! You won't quit, I'll fire you! No discipline!' Zina, what shall we do now?"

Zina got up.

"Let's paint a little for the last time. I'll teach you how to do a roll. Okay?"

"Of course, Zina. Sure."

The girls painted the apartment a second time, in silence, quickly, in tempo with Zina's mood. Suddenly someone called to Zina.

"Cheprasova!" Bugrov leaned against the door frame smoking. No one knew how long he had been standing there. "Come with me and we'll talk."

They walked to the tent camp, but they didn't talk. Bugrov was silent, and Zina didn't say anything either. "Maybe he's decided to turn me in to the police?"

Bugrov stopped by the supply house.

"See the booth?" On the clearing, between the tents, a brand new glass kiosk shone like a rainbow. "Cigarettes, canned goods, candy, that sort of thing. I offer you the job."

"But what do I know about selling? I've never in my life..."

"Can you count to 100? Fine! We don't ask for more. A person comes up, asks for cigarettes, etc. I hope you keep out of jail. I've settled it with the head of supplies. Well, agreed?"

"Yes... what's your name and patronymic?"

"Who asks a manager that? You should ask his name of secretaries, of knowledgeable persons. I'm Ivan Petrovich."

"Thank you, Ivan Petrovich."

"You see, as a painter I just can't take you, though you are real good at it. The girls have to make a living too. Here, of course, you'll make less. But then you wanted to

get a hold here. So, set about getting a hold. And, Cheprasova, thanks—for persistence. That's all. Go over your multiplication tables. It'll come in handy."

Zina ran to tell the news to the girls in Postoyanni. Asya and Mitya were sitting on the log near the house, looking very serious and leaning towards each other.

"I'm staying, I'm staying, Asya!" yelled Zina from a distance.

Asya ran to meet her. They embraced, broke into tears and then started to laugh.

Mitya extended his hand.

"Congratulations!"

Zina kissed his rosy cheeks and his awkward warm lips. Mitya was ablaze. He blinked his red eyelashes and turned his head right and left.

"Zina, what'd you do to him! Nobody has ever kissed him, except for some dogs." Asya laughed and said loudly and gayly, "It's true what they say: don't touch the unknissed." Something shook in Asya's voice, a dryish rattle note, but Zina didn't notice.

Mitya again accompanied her to the ferry. Zina was giddy and she talked without stopping. Mitya was silent and studiously wrinkled his pink forehead, but Zina had no time to notice.

By the white rock Mitya gulped for air greedily and jerkily and asked: "Zina, you have a daughter? Asya told me."

"Yes." Zina was still smiling. She hadn't come out of her happy excitement yet.

"I didn't know." Mitya hesitated and turned his head right and left. "I walked you to the ferry every day and . . . Zina, don't be offended. This is what I want in life: to start a family in a clean place, raise children, work. The taiga at my side. But my own children. That's how it is. Sorry, Zina. It won't work."

Zina straightened up and turned pale. It seemed to her that she was falling into quick sand, sinking deeper and deeper . . . She jerked her head and moved aside as though to avoid something—like a flying stone or a branch.

"You think I need you! Get going! 'Your own children, it won't work out!' Who do you think you are?! Country

bumpkin!" Zina ran in the water without waiting for the ferry to touch shore.

At home in her little room, she cried her heart out, her head hidden under the pillow so that Fenya wouldn't hear. "That's what comes of not saying anything about Vera. My sunshine, my golden one. I don't need anybody. I wanted to buy happiness at your expense. What do I need with a respectable life?! And Asya—the snake. Did she have to blab it? He decided I'd deceived him. But maybe Asya just said it without thinking. And even if she did it deliberately, she did right. She's taught me a lesson I'll never forget."

9

She was not much good as a salesgirl. She dropped money and gave out change unsurely, checking over everything in her head—"am I giving the right amount, didn't I cheat them?" But Zina knew for certain she wouldn't be behind a counter forever. She got this job, and she'd get another. And this stall was well placed. Even Bugrov, when he came to buy his cigarettes, said:

"My, what a view!"

She quickly understood that since most of her customers were men jokes, suggestive remarks, passing flirtations—were unavoidable. No matter how your heart aches you smile, joke around. What else can you do?

"Why did you come here, lovely? To change your name or to redo your biography?"

"To change my name. But I won't take yours."

"Zina, why does a cow give white milk if she eats green grass?"

"No one would drink green milk."

"May I call you sweetheart? My sweetheart."

"Sure, sweetheart."

She had not seen Asya for 3 days—she did not come for lunch and it was impossible to find her in her tent. Zina was worried. "Can she be hiding because she doesn't want to see me? Or is she ashamed she told Mitya? Or is

she jealous? She laughed and laughed at him, but when she saw he was looking elsewhere, she pounced. And got furious at me. I'm the one who should be furious. And now what? It hurts a little, but what can you do? It'll stop hurting."

She wanted to visit Asya on Saturday; but everybody was sent off to Kazachinsk for two days. For two days all bulldozers, graders, and tractors in Magistralnoye built a road from the Kazachinsk airport to the Kirenga. The regional authorities arranged for the drivers and tractor operators to be given free meals. Zina helped the local girls from the Kazachinsk cafeteria with cooking, she worked from morning till night, rarely even sticking her perspiring face out of the window to get some air—drivers eat a lot.

On Saturday evening before everyone dispersed the head mechanic unlocked the sideboard in the dining hall.

"Men get 100 grams a piece. You earned it. A bottle for every five men. And the girls are invited. They fed us, for god's sakes!"

A dark dishevelled chap with white teeth sat next to Zina. He broke into so wild and deafening a yell when they started sing "Glorious Sea, Sacred Baikal" that Zina jumped and knocked a neighbour's glass out of his hand. It fell into a bowl of beetroot soup; greasy splatters rose up in a fountain. They made the man stop singing. He leaned toward Zina and said in a hoarse bass.

"I can't sing at all, but I like to. As soon as I join in a song there's always some sort of an embarrassment. I'm Nikolai. Zina? Zina, I'll tell you all my faults right away. Well, the singing you already heard. Then I love to boast. Remember—no lying, just boasting. Will you allow me to boast?"

"What for?"

"With a modest secretive one you'd be bored still. But with a boaster everything's on the up and up. People laugh at him, nip at him, but they know he's basically good. I want them to know that. Clear?"

"Clear. If you know how, boast."

"Zina, look at these control levers." He placed two enormous black bear-like fists on the table. "They can do

anything. Dig ditches, drill shafts, put up houses, hold a steering wheel. I built all the hydropower stations in Siberia, worked on the Kama Motor Works and now I've come here. I had thanks and presents everywhere. What moves me round this world—I don't know. Maybe so that I can boast in some Kazachinsk or other. Nikolai Kokoulin's been there, and there, done this, and this. Understand?"

"Where will you go now?"

"I'll stay here for the while. Wait till one railroad is built, work some. Then I'll see."

He gave her a lift to Klyuchi. Lighting up a cigarette in the truck, he looked at her with unwarranted frankness.

"You're trusting. You listen, you wonder, what you are told sinks. I like you—you're my sort."

Hurriedly, unappropriately, Zina blurted out:

"I have a daughter."

"And a husband?"

"No."

"Hard for you?"

"Don't know. Not really. Sometimes perhaps."

"I see. Lump everything together. Doesn't matter."

In the morning he beeped his horn under her window.

"Let's go to work. Zina, have you been here long? How come we didn't meet before?"

"A month."

"Uhuh. I was out harvesting then. Listen, yesterday I didn't get a chance to tell you. I have two kids too, they live with my mother. While I was rambling all over the world my wife ran off with an army officer." Nikolai pulled his cap down over his eyes as if to fence himself off from Zina.

"Are you boasting or lying?"

"Lying."

"What for?"

"So you won't feel bad."

"Why should I?"

"So you can breathe easier."

Zina laughed. "You're not a boaster, you're a chatter-box."

"But a nice one."

"Of course."

10

Asya appeared at Zina's stall on Monday. She approached slowly and the closer she got, the redder her cheeks got.

"Asya! Where have you been?! I didn't know what to think. No Mitya or you anywhere!"

Asya glanced at her timidly, doubtfully. Then she realised that Zina was sincere and she changed in an instant—flew right up to the stall; instead of the tent camp, Zina now saw only Asya's humid blue eyes.

"Zina! Zina, dear! I thought all was over. I thought everything was finished. But I was drawn to you. Thought I'd come have a look at you."

"Silly girl. Because of Mitya, right?" Asya nodded.

"I cried, of course. I was hurt, but what can you do: everything's as it should be, Asya."

"Zina, we're getting married. This Saturday."

"Well, well. Congratulations, Asya." There was a chilly stab at her heart, a chill. Then it went away. "From the bottom of my heart."

"Move into my tent, Zina. We're renting a room from an old man. There's no hope of an apartment just now. Hundreds of newlyweds."

"When can I move in?" Zina grabbed at her heart, it had jumped so.

"Today if you like."

"Tonight, right away. But wait for me—I'll move in as you leave. So then nobody grabs your place."

"Okay. Will you come to the wedding? And, in general, all is as it was?"

"Of course. What are you talking about... But Asya, how can it be? You laughed at him, swore at him, and now—a wedding?"

"I could still be laughing, but you somehow brought out another side of him. That is... Oh, what are you asking stupid questions for!"

11

Zina walked down to the shore, to the sand spit with the white rock. She threw her knapsack and suitcase onto the rock and turned. The ferry sailed off and moved farther and farther away. Zina sighed: "Well, thank god. I've crossed for good." She raised her hand and waved it sadly and weakly. Vasya the ferryman sounded a soft parting whistle. Two sled dogs, one white and one red, stood on the deck and gently wagged their tails—as if they, too, were saying goodbye to Zina.

12

Who will tell what happened next?
Someone else, not I.

Request to Readers

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